

## **Swimming in the dark by Lilla0815**

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**Summary:** He was just surviving. He didn't care about anyone and anything, until the day someone changed it.

## 1. Prologue

He was a loser. He had always been one.

Nobody choose to become a loser, it is something that happens without your intentions and probably without any effort, but at the end of the story, that is what he was: a pathetic loser.

He didn't remember when that course had begun: one day he was a normal kid living his life, the next day people were laughing at him and avoiding him like he had some kind of disease.

Eventually he grew up and a part of him had stopped caring about what the others were saying to him, mostly because it was nothing that he didn't know already. He just knew that one day he was going to leave that place and never look back.

Mike Wheeler was seventeen and he was a complete loser. Why? It was a question he could no answer.

Mrs. Shady was reading a paragraph from some book, he didn't like English literature, it was boring and definitely not worth to pay any attention, but somehow he had always managed to get an A. His eyes were looking around the classroom, hoping to find something to focus on, so he could actually do something interesting, but of course the odds were against him. That classroom was just so empty and his classmates were even worse than listening to the teacher. Giving up, he took a piece of paper out of a book and after finding a pencil he began to draw some lines. Nothing too difficult, nothing too good, just something that will definitely keep him entertained while waiting for the bell to ring.

He could hear girls whispering to each other and boys talking quietly about whatever football game was coming in the next month, the teacher didn't care about the noise and just kept going with her book. It was kind of funny how people were physically there, but mentally they were miles and miles away.

Mike kept drawing on his paper, that was the only thing he could do and the only one he did during every class. He didn't have anyone to

talk to, nor chat with, he was alone because, of course, who wanted to be friend with a loser? He had been one since 5th grad and that, had definitely changed his all social life.

He was more alone than anyone he had ever known. He should have been worried about that, but after a little while he got used to it and now, living in complete loneliness, wasn't as bad as it used to be.

When he heard the bell ring, twenty minutes later, he sighed in relief; quickly he packed all his stuff and rushed out the class. He was supposed to have lunch in the cafeteria, like everybody else, but walked past it and went straight to the library. That was where he had lunch: in a corner between a wall and a shelf full of old and smelly books. At first he had been scared that maybe the librarian would have been there, but she was never around and he was definitely grateful for that. Although he knew that if someone would see him he would end up in troubles, however he was invisible to everybody.

He had found that spot by accident the third day of his first year of high school and it had become his place ever since. He had tried to have lunch with everybody else and it ended up with everyone making fun of him. So that place, away from the rest of the world, was his safe island.

Mike sat down with his back against the yellow wall and his long legs stretched in front of him, he took his lunch out of his lunch box and quietly started to eat his ham and cheese sandwich. Life wasn't so bad, though, high school sucked and he really wanted to run away from that place pretty much every second of his days, but he only had a year left, after that he would just leave Hawkins, move to Boston and just start a new life in a place where nobody knew him.

Yes, he would probably miss his mother and his sisters, but he would get over it at some point. He was going to become an adult and just move from a life in a town that had kept him underwater all his life.

He looked at the watch on his wrist, lunch was almost done, few more hours and he was, finally, going to be free. He left the library walking slowly, he had math but even if he liked it, there was no way that he was going to get there first. He just kept wandering around,

avoiding anything that could cause any trouble, he really didn't want to deal with anybody and most important he didn't want to be beaten up by those mouth-breathers who, instead of caring about their lives, cared more about destroying his. He had lost count of how many times he got hurt by those bullies, trying to hide cuts and bruises from his mom and repeating in his head that everything was going to end soon.

Mike was only a few steps away from his class when he stopped in front of the window that was facing the outside of his school. He just looked for a few seconds at the group of people sitting on the benches: the cool kids, why they were cool would always be a mystery to him. He glanced at them, they were all laughing with each other, joking and making fun of the others, it just didn't make any sense. He saw how a girl, with short and curly brown hair stood up on one of the benches and said something that made all laugh like pigs.

He shook his head and walked away repeating his own mantra all over again: *one more year, Mike, just survive one more year.*

## 2. Chapter 1

### Chapter 1

It was the end of November and even if it was still fall, it was as cold as it would be during winter, and Mike just loved winter.

It was, without any doubt, his favorite season. He wasn't really sure why he liked it, but something about it, made him feel like home. The cold, the rain, the clouds that covered everything like a big blanket were just the perfect combination which helped him to believe that there was still something good in that world.

He felt free while riding his bike back home: the wind through his hair, the rain wetting his face and the amazing feeling of being in control for once. He didn't care if it had to ride almost two miles every day, he was happy while he was there.

He had lost count of how many times his mom had yelled at him that he should have rode the bus like everybody else, but he had never listened, he never did. She didn't know him, she didn't know anything and that was the way things were supposed to stay.

When he arrived and walked through the door, he was welcomed by his parents' screams, he had really hoped for a second that they wouldn't be home and that he could enjoy a little bit of peace, but ironically his wishes were never satisfied. Sighing he run upstairs and slammed door behind his back and locked it, just to be sure that nobody would come to bother him.

He was jumping from one hell to another, everyday, without any break. It was like a circle without an end.

Taking deep breaths and dropping his backpack and coat on the floor, he lied on his bed and reached for his mp3, plugged in his headphones and after playing shuffle from his playlist, he was finally able to shut down the yells coming from downstairs.

Mike wasn't stupid, he knew why his parents were like this and it was because of him. He was supposed to be the second men of the house,

the one that, with two sisters, would make his dad proud and his mom happy. He wasn't that. He never did that and he never would.

He closed his eyes and let the music fill his head, maybe a few years ago he would have cared about his parents fighting because of him, but now, he didn't care about anything.

The clock on his nightstand flashed, in red, the time: it was ten past four; he had tons of homework and zero desire to do them. So, instead of starting to study, he grabbed the comic book that had abandoned on the floor the night before and started to read it. It was an old number of the X-Men, he was kind of obsessed with those kind of things. When he was younger he used to believe that those heroes were real and that one day they would come and finally save him. Of course it never happened and at some point he had started to see them for what they were: just old comic books.

It was only when his mp3 turned off alone, probably after running off of its battery, that he looked up and saw that, magically, it was 6:30.

"Shit!" he murmured throwing away the book and getting up from his bed. It happened every time.

He ran to his backpack and quickly took out his books, why did it keep happening to him?!

Forgetting about dinner, knowing that he would definitely have problems with his parents, Mike started his homework, without any clue on what time he was going to finish. Maybe if he could focus he would finish at a reasonable time, but he seriously doubted that. Sighing for the thousand time, that day, he just gave up and started solving the equation in his book.

The first thought that came in his mind was that his neck was hurting like hell. Why was it hurting so much?! He slowly opened his eyes, just to find himself almost lying on his desk and his face smashed on his History book. It was one in the morning and he had been sleeping on his book. Fantastic.

He stood up and quickly changed into his pajamas and went to bed, tired and sore, hoping that when he would wake up in the morning

his life wouldn't be as painful as it was.

His eyes went completely wide when he heard his mom yelling. "Michael! It's 7:30! Get the hell out of your room! You are going to be late! Again!"

So much for a different day. Saying that he got dressed, packed his stuff and had breakfast faster than a lightning, was nothing. He was literally flying.

He arrived at school just in time, red as a pepper and all sweaty for riding his bike like crazy. But he made it, he was there and another useless day could start. Ignoring all his classmates disgusted looks, he sat down at his usual spot: right besides the window, happy that he would be able to escape from that torture.

Mike mentally slept all through first, second and third period. He honestly had no idea what they did in those classes. Didn't care about History, English and definitely didn't care about Spanish. When the bell rang he thanked whatever god existed. Lunch break. Thank you so much.

He had just given his sandwich a bite when, for the first time in three years, he heard footsteps, getting closer and closer.

"What are you doing?"

Mike turned his head, now facing the hallway between the shelves and there right in the middle, there was a woman.

"What are you doing?" she asked again, her voice squawking and her hands on her hips.

"Eating?" Mike answered. Wasn't that obvious?

"You cannot eat in the library! That's why you have a cafeteria." She said getting angry and her face redder.

He looked at her and tried to think if he had ever seen her around, but nothing came up on his mind. She wasn't tall at all, her black hair was pulled up in a messy bun and she was wearing a white shirt and a black skirt. He didn't remember her, was she new?

"You cannot eat here." She repeated.

"There's nobody around." He stated quietly.

He understood that he might have said the wrong thing when the woman became so red that Mike thought she was going to explode.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Library." Her voice sounded like a runner who had just run ten miles. "And you are going to have detention. Hopefully you will learn to respect this place!" she declared irritated.

Wait, could the librarian put people in detention? Was that really happening?

Eventually what should have been just a thought was actually spoken aloud.

Oh shit!

"Yes, of course I can put you in detention! And you, mister, you just won two weeks of it! I want you there one, no, twice at week! Every Wednesday and every Friday!" if she could have had smoke coming down from her nose that would have been just perfect.

Rolling his eyes he put his lunch box back in his backpack and stood up.

"Two weeks, understood?" she asked "And if you don't show up I will know."

Mike nodded, trying really hard to keep a straight face. Where did she come from? She looked like a Hobbit.

Only when he was out of the library the all situation hit him. Shit, he thought. Shit, shit, shit.

He didn't care about detention; it was actually a good excuse to avoid his house for a few hours, but that place had been his safe place. Shit.

Where was he going to have lunch now? The cafeteria was completely out of his list, way too dangerous. The bathrooms were even worse, no way that he was going to end up with his head down

the toilet again.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Maybe he could ask to one of his teachers to stay in class? No way, they all hated him.

Panic hit him pretty hard. This wasn't really happening.

He spent the rest of the school hours trying to think about a place where he could stay but nothing came into his mind and because he was so wrapped in his own thoughts, he almost forgot about detention, remembering what day of the week was only at the end of his lessons.

Well, at least he had even more time to think about a solution now.

Mike Wheeler walked, for the first time in his life, into detention. Ironically, he was almost excited about it. It kind of disappointed him when he found that it was just a normal empty classroom, with desks and chairs, and nothing scary or threatening like he had imagined. A male teacher was sat in a chair, playing with his phone, completely ignoring Mike as he walked in and took his place close to the window.

He waited, unsure of what he was supposed to do. A few minutes later, someone else walked in and with rush sat in one of the chairs right in front of the teacher.

Mike hadn't been able to take a look at the person's face, but from the shape of the body he could definitely say that it was a girl.

The teacher rose up, still with his phone in his hands. "There will be no talking, no cell phones, no music, no homework, no drawing and no painting. If you guys have to go to the bathroom you will have to check with me first so I can call someone to take you. Detention is going to finish at 5." Then he sat down and kept playing with his phone.

The girl who was in the front row suddenly turned back and stared at him, surprise on her face.

He looked back at her, he must have seen her somewhere around, she had really curly brown hair that barely reached her shoulders, tanned skin and very large and big brown eyes.

She was really pretty.

*What the hell, Mike?! You can't think that of someone that you just saw!*

The girl kept looking at him and that was making him quite uncomfortable. Did she know him?

Well, of course she did! Who didn't know Michael Loser Wheeler?

He was about to look away, when she did something really weird, she smiled at him and waved her hand.

The first thing he did, was turning around and making sure that she was actually waving at him and not someone else, but when he saw that he was the only one there, he turned back and barely nodded his head to her.

*Really?!*

She smiled again at him, before going back to her original position.

Saying that he was stunned was a huge misunderstanding, what the hell was that?

So instead of thinking about finding a new place where to have lunch, Mike's head started to repeat what had just happened all over again.

It wasn't the fact that a pretty girl (*seriously?*) had just waved at him, it wasn't that she had smiled at him; it was that she had seen him, that had confused him that much.

But she was just trying to be polite, he guessed, even if nobody was polite with him.

The logical part of his brain kicked in and told him to stop, she had just tried to be nice and that was all.

There was no point on focusing on something that didn't make any sense, so, kind of bored, Mike decided to pay attention to the weird teacher in front of him. He was in his mid-fifties, with a weird combination of white and black hair. The best part was that he hadn't stopped playing with his phone since the minute detention had started. Mike wasn't sure if he had seen the teacher around, well, he didn't know any other teacher except his own.

He had been so wrapped in his own weird thoughts, first about the girl and then about the teacher, that he hadn't paid any attention to the time, ten more minutes and he was going to be free.

When the clock on the wall finally hit five o'clock, he jumped off the chair, grabbing his backpack and rushed out the door.

"You! Wait!" a voice said from behind his back.

But of course he didn't stop.

"Hey! Come on!" the voice was closer and for a second Mike thought to actually wait for her, but he just kept walking.

"Don't make me run!" she almost yelled.

What the hell did she want now?!

He turned to finally face her and she was just a few feet away from him. "Oh thank you, I thought you were going to make me run!"

Mike looked at her... was he dreaming? Was all that day a weird dream that he was having while sleeping on the desk in his room? Why was someone talking to him?

"Why were you in detention?" she asked.

No way that he was going to answer that.

"I have never seen you there and I spend a lot of time in that room."

Mike saw her brown eyes looking at him head to toes, she knew who he was and from the way she was acting and from what she was wearing, he knew she was someone he couldn't talk to. This could have been a trap and he was just going to fall for it because he was stupid enough.

"Gotta go." Mike whispered and walked away, leaving the girl behind him.

"See you soon!" she screamed while he was walking out of the door.

He got onto his bike and headed home. This was his life: a prank after a prank, a joke after another and useless illusions after useless illusions.

Not that he cared about what had just happened, but a part of couldn't stop thinking about the fact that that girl, was the first person to talk to him in seven years, without insulting him or breaking him. But as he pedaled to his house, he thought that she was going to tell everything that had happened to those people, how he had been so quiet and wasn't able to say a word. They were going to laugh and then, they were definitely going to beat the crap out of him.

For a second he felt like crying, so he could just get everything out: the frustration of being caught by the librarian, detention, explaining that to his parents, how his dad was going to look at him with disappointment written all over his face and now the thought of what was going to happen tomorrow. However, he didn't cry, he just kept pedaling... what did he do to deserve all of that shit?

**Author's note:** Hello! Just wanted to write a quick thank you to the people who decided to follow this story and leave a review! It really means a lot! I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter that is indeed slow, but, kind of necessary to understand what our Mike is going through.

**Thank you again to everyone!**

### 3. Chapter 2

#### Chapter 2

The warm water of the shower was hitting his back, he was sitting on the floor with his head in his hands, taking deep and long breaths. When he had arrived home his mother had asked him where he had been and as soon as the word 'detention' had left his mouth, she had started screaming and walking around the house saying that she couldn't believe how irresponsible he was. His father, who Mike considered pathetic under a lot of different point of view, had looked at him and told him that he had thought that his son was smarter than that.

Mike hadn't said anything, it was going to be pointless anyways, he just went upstairs and decided to take a shower.

And that's where he had finally let his tears fall down. Quietly, away from everybody, hiding and tired, oh so tired, of being nothing but a failure.

He went to bed without doing his homework and without dinner, abandoning himself to the darkness.

When the alarm woke him up that morning, Mike left the house without having breakfast, riding slowly to school while he was trying to get mentally ready for whatever was coming next.

To his surprise, though, when he parked his bike, nobody was waiting for him. He walked to the entrance looking around, expecting the worst, but nothing happened.

He reached his locker, took some books out and still, nothing happened.

Two thoughts came into Mike's head, first: the girl had just shut up and he was safe; second they were planning something really big and he was screwed.

All his senses were telling him that the second option was the most

realistic one, but there was a tiny little voice in the back of his head that was telling him that maybe, just maybe, that girl wasn't as bad as he thought.

Mike spent first period in complete worry, during Biology, though, he relaxed a little bit, he liked the subject and made it easier. Third period, during P.E. he was back to his paranoia, but everything went as usual: him trying to avoid any exercise and his classmates avoiding him.

Lunch time made everything worse, he didn't have a place to hide anymore (he also went to check the library but the woman was there, walking around the room like an eagle). Mike was dead.

He was sitting on the stairs, they were empty and it was the only place available, yes he was exposed, yes the hallways were going to be full of people soon, but if something was going to happen at least the principal's office was two doors away.

Besides the fact that his mother was furious, she had still made his lunch, he had to remember to thank her later. Starving, he finished his usual sandwich in a couple of minutes, slapping himself mentally, he should have had breakfast.

"Hey, you!"

Even if it was a girl's voice, Mike's heartbeat started to pound faster in his chest, here we go, he thought, this is the end. Carefully he looked in front of him, ready to sprint away if necessary, but he was absolutely surprised to see the girl from yesterday standing in front of him. Alone.

What the hell was she doing there?

"I saw you from the window." She said pointing at it. "Why are you here?"

He was trying really hard to keep his panic at a low level.

"I know you can talk, you did it yesterday."

He just stared at her, having no clue about what he was supposed to

do. He didn't usually get that scared, he always fought back, but honestly didn't have any idea of what was wrong with him.

The girl got closer and sat next to him. "I'm Jane." She said smiling and giving him her hand.

"Uhm..." he murmured, unsure. "I'm Mike." And slowly shook her hand.

"See? I knew you could talk!" Jane exclaimed, her voice almost excited and her brown eyes becoming brighten.

"Why are you talking to me?" he asked without even thinking, his voice harsh enough to make her smile disappear.

*No, please, smile again! I'm sorry!*

"Well, I just saw you alone here and..."

"But you know who I am."

"I..." she started "I guess I do."

"Then why are you talking to me?" he just couldn't shut up, could he?

"Oh... I just thought..."

"I don't need you pity." Mike interrupted her, standing up.

She looked confused. "I am not pitting you."

"Look, I have to go. I don't want your friends to think that I am trying to talk to you."

Saying that she looked hurt was, without any doubt, a misunderstanding. He wanted to kick his own ass for being such a jerk, but he couldn't risk more than what he was already doing.

She nodded. "I guess I'll see you around then."

"Yeah, whatever." *Asshole!*

He was already a few feet away when she called him again,

surprised, he turned to look at her. "I'm sorry." Jane told him.

And Mike wasn't quite sure what she was sorry for.

The rest of the day passed slowly, very slowly and he couldn't help to sigh in relief when he got out of school still in one piece.

When he got home, he started some homework and had dinner with his family for the first time that week. He shut up during the whole thing and nobody tried to make him talk.

He didn't hate his life, he just couldn't stand it.

When he went to bed, though, he couldn't fall asleep. His mind, like a broken DVD player, kept showing him the chat that he had with Jane. She was so pretty, her hair so curly and kind of messy, her eyes so big that for a second he thought he had got lost in them. She was so small, but of course, he was the giant.

She had been wearing a pink shirt and a pair of blue jeans, nothing fancy. Not like the day before when she had a short blue dress. He thought that pink on her was the perfect color and for a second, after thinking that, he really wanted to face palm himself.

She had looked harmless, but something wasn't quite right. He had been an idiot, and most important he had been rude. He knew that, if she had thought that he was a weirdo, now she was probably sure of it. Should he try to make up to her? Maybe apologize?

Mike stared the wall for a long while, it wasn't her fault if he was stupid and had no idea of how to react to that weird situation.

The next day, after spending most of the night awake and trying to understand something that wasn't understandable, he walked into school with a precise aim: he was going to find Jane, possibly alone, and tell her that he was sorry. He had a plan and a speech that, he would never tell to anyone, had rehearsed in front of the mirror of his bathroom that morning,

Odds, though, were against him, he kept looking for her but nothing, it was like she had just disappeared. He just hoped that she would be in detention with him, didn't she say that she was always there?

So, the first thing he did when he walked into the classroom, late that day, was to look for her but it was only him and the same weird teacher from last time.

Giving up, he sat down on his usual spot and tried to think if there would ever be another chance for him to apologize or just talking to her again. He promised himself that, when he was going to find her, he wasn't going to be the same idiot.

As soon as he finished that thought, as if by magic, Jane came through the door.

*Wait, what?!*

She looked around and smiled when her eyes met his.

Mike flushed so much that for a second he thought that his face was on fire. And because that wasn't enough, she walked towards him and took place next to his side.

*Talk to her, apologize! Come on!*

Instead, he just stared at her, voice dying in his throat.

This time the teacher didn't say anything and read a book, a Spanish book from the weird title on the cover.

*Mike, talk to her. You said you were going to do it.*

But before he could open his mouth, Jane turned around to face him.

"Hey, look, I am sorry if I have offended you. I really didn't want to." She whispered, the look on her face almost broke Mike, she looked really sorry.

Jane was already turning back when he actually opened his mouth.

"No, I'm sorry." He said quietly. "It's not your fault, I was the real asshole. You were just trying to be nice."

*Yes! See? You can do it!*

Saying that Jane was stunned was nothing, she looked like she had just seen a ghost. "Uhm... yes, I guess I was." But then she smiled and Mike's heart skipped a beat.

"Maybe we could try to... you know, talk to each other?"

"Why?" *Come on, Wheeler! Shut up!*

Jane seemed to actually think about it. "Well, because, as you said, I am trying to be nice and then... because we are here in detention and we can have fun instead of being bored."

He didn't want to be mean, but there was something really weird about the all situation.

"But, why me? You know who I am." *And since you keep repeating it, she won't forget about it, genius.*

"So?"

"So, you are..." *say his name, it's just a name, he won't magically appear here.* "Troy's friend." The panic in his tone made her face flinch a little.

"I know who I am." She replied. "And I know who I am friend with, this doesn't mean that I can't be nice to you."

Mike looked at her, he really wasn't sure what he was supposed to do and, even if a part of him liked how she was, he still felt really uncomfortable.

Jane read his expression and, although she couldn't understand everything he went through, she knew that it was a hard decision for him.

"Listen," she started "I don't want to do anything that could put you in danger or that you are not sure about. We don't have to be friends, we don't have to be anything if you don't want to but I just think that it would be nice for you to, you know, have someone around."

Mike shook his head. "I am fine on my own." He wasn't trying to be mean, it was just the truth of the situation.

"I know that you are, but how bad would it be to have a familiar face here? Someone to just say hi every now and then?"

"But what about *your* friends? What would they say when they'll see you talking to me or 'saying hi'?"

"They are my friends, but they don't get to decide about my life." She told him pretty hard.

He looked at her, he remembered to see her around school, following those people, laughing at their jocks, they were like a group of wolves: always together ruling over everyone.

How could he trust her? How could he know that it wasn't a trap?

Jane kept staring at him, waiting and trying to figure out why his eyebrows were so frowned and his eyes so deep in thoughts.

She knew what had happened to him, she knew how they were always talking about 'Frogface Wheeler', she knew all of that and she had been stupid enough to be quiet for years.

But then, she had an idea..."Look, what if we don't tell anyone about this?" she exclaimed almost excited.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You don't want Troy and the others to find out, but you need a friend and, I need someone who is not an asshole 24/7, we could, you know, spend some time together and have fun."

Saying that Mike was really confused was nothing, yes, she kind of had a point but it really didn't make a lot of sense.

"So you are ashamed?" he asked trying to understand.

Jane shook immediately her head. "No, absolutely no! I am not ashamed, I am just trying ok?"

"I just don't understand, and this" Mike said pointing at them "this is just wrong."

"Why is it wrong?" she was getting angry and her cheeks had started to become red, he thought that it was actually cute, even if she probably wanted to cut his head off.

"How can I trust you? I don't know you."

"I don't know you either, but I want to. Why is it so hard for you to give me a chance?"

Mike didn't answer, he had a long list of why he shouldn't do it, but he also knew that he couldn't blame her for everything that had happened in his life.

Looking away, needing time to think, he stared at the teacher, who was still reading his book and hadn't done anything while they were talking. He felt really bad for him.

Jane was waiting, looking at him and he could see something close to hope in her eyes.

*You could use a friend, you know that.*

*No, I don't.*

*Oh seriously?*

*Shut up.*

*No, you shut up!*

"So..." he wasn't sure of what he was doing, but he had nothing to lose, right? And he really didn't want to see her disappointed face again. "Do you already know how people hangout in secret or are we just going to find out at one point?"

"Oh my god!" she screamed almost jumping off the chair "Seriously?!"

The smile on her face was something that Mike knew, was going to drive him crazy, it made him want to smile himself and just... stared at it for the rest of his life.

"Only if you don't say a word to anyone."

"I won't, I promise." Jane answered her voice serious and he felt a thrill on his back.

"Promise?" he repeated sounding confused, why was she promising something to him? He wasn't someone that important.

"Yeah, you know, a promise is something you can't break." She explained calmly.

"I know what a promise is." He grunted, making her smile.

"Well then, tomorrow is Saturday... do you want to do something?"

Mike nodded. "Sure, what do you have in mind?"

He saw her thinking deeply, like she was trying to read him. "What if we go hiking? I know a trail, in the woods, that is super quiet and we could just talk and nobody would ever find out."

"Sounds cool." He agreed after a minute, kind of stunned by the fact that she had guessed one of his favorite things to do. He totally hated Hawkins but he loved spending time in the woods, surrounded only by silence.

"Cool" she said "Do you want to give me your number? I can text you when I wake up and we can decide the time."

"I don't have a phone." He admitted sheepishly, looking at the floor.

"What?! How can you not have a phone? We are in the twenty-first century, everybody has a phone, Mike." She sounded really surprised.

"I had one, but the only thing I was receiving from it, were prank calls and kind of threatening messages, I had to cancel the number and at that point it just didn't make sense to have another one." He had no idea why he was telling her that, she probably knew it already. Even though, her expression changed, while he was talking, becoming hard and angry.

"I'm sorry." She spoke after a few seconds and went to touch the hand that was resting on the

school desk. Taken back, Mike didn't know what to do, but he couldn't help to think of how tiny her hand was compared to his.

"It's ok, it's not your fault and it's in the past." He finally managed to say, still shocked by her gesture.

"Then, I will come to pick you up around 11, just write me your address and I will be there."

"It's 5 o'clock, guys, you are free to go." The teacher informed, startling them. He was already wearing his coat and was ready to leave.

Mike made to grab his backpack, but stopped when he noticed that his hand was still covered by Jane's.

He looked at her, his face burning and when she realized why, she immediately pulled her hand back, blushing too. They stopped for a few seconds, just so Mike could scribble his address on a piece of paper.

And when they, walked out the classroom in silence, it wasn't awkward and Mike breathed in relief. She followed him all the way to his bike. "See you tomorrow, then."

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

She waited for him to get on and waved gently at him when he started to ride away.

Mike smiled, it was stupid and it was probably going to end up badly, but he had something to look forward to and it definitely was better than nothing at all.

**Author's note:** Hello everyone! I just wanted to thank you guys (again!) for reading my story and a special thank you to who decided to favorite/follow/review it.

In case some of you were wondering, the story takes place in our days, I didn't specify it at the beginning, so I apologize for the misunderstanding.

**Thank you all and happy new year!**

## 4. Chapter 3

### Chapter 3

There was no way that Jane was actually real, that was the only thought in Mike's mind, she was something else, and entirely different from anything and anyone he had ever seen.

He kept looking at her, trying to be not so obvious, the way she walked in the woods like she had spent all her life there, how she played with her hair when she started to think about something, the little smile that she hid every time he said something embarrassing and her eyes, he knew they were already magic, but now? He couldn't stop thinking about them: they were so big and brown and in her look there was always this sweetness and understanding that made his heart beat faster and faster.

She had arrived at his house at eleven on the dot, and had this excited look on her face that Mike had found extremely cute. They hadn't talk a lot, which he was really grateful for, just listened to the radio and humming some songs that were playing.

She had driven outside Hawkins, he had no idea where they were going, but somehow he felt like he could trust her. Jane had parked outside a weird and old fence right in front of, what he thought, was the starting point of the trail.

It wasn't too cold that morning and the sun was shining in the sky, a very different weather from the rainy and cold one they had in the past weeks. Everything was, weirdly, perfect.

They had been walking for several minutes, still in silence, listening only to their footsteps echoing.

"What do you think if I go first?"

Mike snapped out of his thoughts and looked at Jane who was looking at him, patiently waiting.

"Oh, sure." Go first for what?

"So we can know each other better." She explained looking at his confused expression.

"Yeah, ok."

"Awesome!" *here's that thrill again.* "My name is Jane, well, my official name is Jane and I'm seventeen. I live in Hawkins, Indiana and, even if a lot of people don't think that I care, one day I hope I will be able to do something good for this world."

Mike frowned, was that it? "What do you mean by official name?" he asked before he could stop himself.

He observed how her face fell for a second, before going back to her usual look.

"You don't have to answer!" he quickly said. *Damn it!*

When she kept walking, without saying another word, Mike knew that he needed to do something.

"My name is Mike, short for Michael, I am seventeen and, ironically I live in the same place as you" he joked and when Jane giggled he thought he was going to die. "I have two sisters, Nancy, who is in college in New York and Holly who goes to elementary school. My only plan for the future is to escape this town and never look back."

"It is a good plan." Jane said softly.

"Yes, it is."

They were quiet again, silence seemed to work better than words between them.

"I'm sorry" she whispered at one point, surprising him.

"For what?" Mike had no idea why all of sudden she looked like she was about to cry.

"For everything that happened to you? I know how people treat you and it's not fair, you don't deserve it, nobody does. You are really sweet and what they did to you it's unfair."

He was speechless, he tried to open his mouth but nothing came out of it.

She didn't seem to notice and kept talking. "I have always hated how Troy and the group talk about you, and I have never done anything, sometimes I would just stay there and pretend to laugh at their stupid jokes about you. Nobody cares if you are hurt, nobody cares to stand up to them and tell them that... they should just shut up and stop talking about you. And I spent years, listening to them and I never did anything, I am as stupid as they are and I am truly sorry, Mike."

His head was spinning, her words hitting him hard and he didn't really know what to say. Mike stopped walking, overwhelmed by everything, and looked at Jane, who had stopped right in front of him.

Her face was a display of emotions, but the one that hit him the most was the regret that was transpiring from her eyes.

He let the words sink in, hoping to understand better what was going on. Of course he was hurt, the loneliness, the pranks, the jokes and all the times that they had put him in a corner and beaten him up until he couldn't move, it didn't matter how much he would push those things down, they were still there and they were always going to be a part of him.

Mike felt his eyes burning, tears ready to fall from his eyes and, instead of stopping them, he let them fall, there was no need to pretend that everything was fine when everything was just really messed up.

Jane got closer, like her first instinct was to hug him, hoping that he would feel better, but stopped last minute, not sure if that was actually what he needed. So instead she just put her hand on his arm, feeling sorry all over again.

It took a few minutes, but when Mike finally managed to calm down, he felt a weird sense of peace, as if hearing those words was actually what he needed all along.

"You ok?" Jane murmured softly, her hand still on his arm.

"Yeah" his voice cracked. "I... it means a lot what you said."

"I'm glad."

They started to walk again, slowly and side by side. "So, do you think you want to explain to me what you meant with 'official name'? Since, you know, I already opened my Pandora box."

Mike saw a tiny smile on her face and felt himself smile too, good sight.

"Do you know how I arrived here only in fourth grade?" Jane started, her voice so low and different from her usual strong one.

"Not really." He admitted. "I just remember a lot of excitement for this new girl."

"Right, yes, everybody was so excited because I was new and nobody really moves to Hawkins."

"That's for sure." Mike joked, trying to help her.

"Well, before I came here, I used to live in Chicago and" she stopped walking again and he did the same, looking at her and waiting. "and I was in the system." She finished, her eyes on the ground. "I spent six years in the system and I went through a lot of fosters houses, eleven precisely, so when I arrived in my last one, the eleventh, the kids in there started to call me Eleven, then when I turned nine, I was adopted and I came to live here and my adopted father decided that Eleven wasn't an appropriate name, so he started to call me by my real name again."

Mike's heart broke in million pieces, he really felt bad and in his mind he could definitely picture her, as a little girl, scared, going from house to house, having no idea what was going on, crying and sobbing, alone in a world that was too big for her.

"I'm sorry..." he gasped without thinking.

"It's ok," she managed to say, her voice still quiet and sad, and even if her eyes weren't looking at him, he could see the unleashed tears trapped in her eyelashes.

And because he was an idiot who had nothing to lose, Mike closed the distance between them and hugged her. It was awkward, at first, because she didn't expect it, but after a second he felt her arms going around his waist, while his were around her shoulders.

She was so small that her face was on his chest and his chin could rest on top of her head. The smell of her hair reached his nose, *roses*, he thought, *she smells like roses*.

Something in the back of his mind told him that, if they were actual pieces of a puzzle, they would have been the right match.

They didn't move for what it seemed to be a lifetime, they were in the middle of the woods, wrapped in each other's arms and nothing was better than that.

Jane was the first to move, slipping slowly away from him, smiling and blushing at the same time.

"Thank you." She said, tucking one of her curls behind her ear.

"Uhm, sure." He felt like a truck just passed over him.

With a mutual understanding they moved from that spot, they weren't going to walk a lot, were they?

"So, you don't like the name Jane?" Mike asked after a few minutes, trying to focus on something that wasn't the feeling of her body in his arms.

She grimaced. "It's someone I am not, or better, someone who people want me to be."

"Do you want to be called Eleven?"

She shook her head. "No, it's my past and not a lot of people would understand what it means."

Mike started to think, but before he could talk she interrupted him. "I know, it's dumb, 'it's just a name' that's what everybody says, but it's not, you know? It's means more to me."

"What about 'El'?"

"What?" confusion in her voice.

"El, like, short for Eleven and, totally different from Jane."

She looked at him, disbelief written everywhere, her mouth open but not sound coming out.

Mike felt like an idiot, what was he thinking? Going around and giving nicknames?

"I'm sorry I completely fucked up..."

"No!" she almost yelled "No, no, it's... it's perfect."

*Wait, what?*

"What?"

"I love it, it sounds like... a new beginning."

"Really?" Astonishment in his voice.

"Yes, I love it, Mike."

"Well, I am glad I could help." And he really was.

"Although...There is no way that Troy or anybody else is going to understand what it means." She confessed.

Mike nodded, she was right, those idiots would never understand something so important.

"What if *you* call me El?" she proposed and he could feel the excitement rising in her voice.

"Do you want me to call you El?" he was definitely perplexed.

"Why not? You came up with it!"

Her eyes were so big, like a doe's eyes and she looked so happy that Mike agreed without even thinking about it. "If you are happy with it,

sure."

"Cool."

Mike took a look at the time on his watch, it was almost one in the afternoon, how in the world time was going so fast?

He was enjoying his time with Ja- no, El, so much that had lost any perception of reality.

But they just kept going on, sometimes brushing their hands against each other or let their arms bump, it was weird, but a nice weird. He quickly gazed at her and his heart, without any permission, immediately sped up.

"Can I ask you something?" He tried, once he had found enough courage.

"Of course."

"Uh... Why are you... uhm, friend with Troy?" his tone was unsure and since he didn't want to make a mess he quickly added: "Because, you know, you are pretty awesome and instead he is an asshole and so it's just..."

He heard her sigh heavily. "No, you are right." She told him. "You know who adopted me, right?"

Mike sheepishly shook his head, he didn't know any of the gossips around that town. "Not really."

El laughed, a very sad and forced laugh. "Well, I was adopted by Martin Brenner."

Mike's eyes went wide. "What?!" he shouted startling her.

"Yep, he is my papa."

He was definitely in shock; Martin Brenner was one of the most powerful and richest man in the state of Indiana, he didn't know a lot, only what he heard from his parents, but everybody knew that he owned half of Hawkins.

"Oh shit..." he mumbled quietly.

"I know" El commented "But short story, Troy's parents are my papa's best friends and he wants me to hang out with the 'Right people' so, I am basically forced to spend time with him and his group."

He really didn't know how to respond to that and silence came again between them, the only sound accompanying their thoughts were their footsteps on the fallen leaves.

Things were making sense for once, and he could understand the situation she was in.

She wasn't like them, he knew it deep down, but the confirmation helped him to believe that, whatever they had, could turn out to be real.

It was his stomach growling that interrupted his own monologue, and since El started to laugh, he knew that she had heard it too.

"Sorry." Mike mumbled embarrassed.

"It's ok" she chuckled "I am hungry too, want to grab something to eat on our way back?"

"Absolutely!"

They started to walk back, thank goodness they hadn't walk a lot.

"I am glad we are doing this." She admitted shyly.

Mike waited a second before saying anything, he had been dumb enough to not understand that he wasn't the only one who needed this, she needed it as much as he did, it was something that was going both directions and the idea made him happy.

"Me too, El." Honesty coming out of his voice.

She looked straight at him, the new nickname surprising her a little but looking happy.

When they finally reached the car, they both stopped having no

intentions on getting in yet. They just stared at each other for a minute, both wanting to say something, but none of them actually saying it. It was nice, at least for Mike, the fact that they didn't need words, most of the time, it was like they knew each other's already and they could understand everything they wanted to say just with one look.

It was El, who of course, made the first move: reaching for his hand and intertwining their fingers. He forgot everything about being hungry and just observed their hands together, squeezing hers for a moment, just to make sure that she was really real.

When Mike finally looked up, he met with her reassuring look and in that moment he just knew that, it didn't matter that the thing they were having didn't have a name and probably didn't make a lot of sense, he just knew that he was already too far into it and for once, he didn't mind it at all.

**Author's note: Heello! Sorry I am updating so late, I have been working a lot lately and didn't have a lot of time...**

**Anyways, thanks so much for your support guys! And hopefully, see you soon!**

## 5. Chapter 4

### Chapter 4

Mike was already awake when the alarm rang Monday morning. He had been awake for a while already, staring the wall, completely lost in his thoughts.

It had been a very, very, very strange weekend, stranger than anything he had ever had in his life.

After the walk, they had gone to have lunch in a diner that, quoting El, 'was the best place in the whole world.' The restaurant had been closed when they had arrived, but when the owner, Benny, had seen them, he had opened the door and, smiling and hugging El really tight, had told them to come inside and sit down wherever they wanted.

Honestly, Mike had been a little scared, yes Benny had hugged El, but he hadn't said a word to him, he had only given a very suspicious look that had made Mike pretty nervous, plus he was a big man, big enough to kick Mike's butt.

She had told him that Benny had been her friend since she had moved to Hawkins, he had helped her once, when she got lost in the woods. Mike had not been able to listen to the whole story, though, getting distracted by her smile or the way she got so excited when she had started to talk.

After a while Benny had joined them and El had introduced him to the man, who, with another scary look, had asked her if he was another of her 'dumb-friends'. She had smiled and told him that no, Mike was not one of them, on the contrary, he was 'a very special friend'.

Of course, the poor guy's heart had started to beat so fast and his face had become so red, that had made Benny's expression change immediately, becoming softer and kind of happier.

When El had dropped him off, she had, awkwardly, hugged him and

told him that they were going to see each other soon. He was still trying to understand if she had been trying to reassure him or herself.

Mike had stayed in the same spot where she had left him for twenty minutes.

He had spent Sunday in a bubble, reviving the previous day all over again and asking himself how she was going to behave on Monday.

And here he was, getting ready to go to school, but not ready to find out how things were going to go back to normal.

He rode slowly, taking his time, trying not to think about the worst, like he usually did, and reminding to himself that El and he were supposed to be a secret, and that was it.

After parking his bike, he walked to his locker and as soon as he opened it, a little piece of paper flew down. Mike frowned and went to pick it up.

*'Hey! Just wanted to tell you that I had a great Saturday with you! I am going to try to sneak out for lunch so I can say 'hi'. Hope you have a great day, El.'*

*P.S I also hope that Troy or the group doesn't bother you, if they do, I apologize now and I promise I am going to make amend for it!'*

He was going to faint, he knew it. Mike read the paper again and again, not able to believe that El (EL!) had actually left that for him.

He stared at her perfect and curvy handwriting smiling like an idiot: was it creepy to think that it was perfect? He shook his head, yes, it was kind of disturbing.

But he couldn't help the smile on his face, and most important, the way his heart had started to pound so fast that he was afraid it was going to come out of his chest.

Carefully he folded the paper and hid it between his books. Mike kept smiling all the way through the hallways and during first, second and third period. It was stupid to feel so happy for something so meaningless, but Mike Wheeler felt like the luckiest idiot walking on

earth.

At lunch time he decided to go sit down on the stairs again, after all that was the spot where El had found him. Everyone was outside, enjoying the warm weather so around him there was nothing except silence. He was really trying hard to not get his hopes up, El had said that '*she was going to try*', so he shouldn't expect her. But it was quite impossible to not look around, hoping to see her walking towards him.

He barely ate his sandwich, he wasn't actually hungry, his stomach was having this annoying party that was driving him insane. *Stop being so nervous! Calm down!*

Glancing at his watch Mike noticed that there were only ten minutes left, there was no way that El was going to show up in such a short time.

Convincing himself that it was ok and that she was probably stuck with those idiots, he started to pack his stuff away, he should definitely work on trying to keep his expectations down.

Mike literally jumped when he felt a pair of cold hands covering his eyes from behind. *What the hell?!*

"Hey you." Said El's soft voice in his ear. "Sorry if I scared you."

*Heart attack in 3...2...1...*

He quickly turned around and her hands fell off from his face. Here she was, sitting on the stairs, her curls all perfectly messy and a soft smile on her lips.

"El!" he exclaimed excited. Too excited.

But she laughed, her sweet and muffled laugh that instead of making him feel embarrassed, made him laugh too.

"How's your day so far?" El asked still smiling.

"Uh... good." He couldn't say that, now that she was there, it was just perfect, right? "How about yours?"

"Not too bad." She answered with a shrug. "I had to come up with an excuse so I could come to see you."

Mike frowned, was she sad? "I'm sorry?" he tried slightly confused.

"Oh no! No! It's not your fault!" El immediately clarified. "I... I just..."she stuttered quietly and Mike was surprised to see her so uncertain about her words. Without thinking, he gently grabbed her hand and squeezed it, trying to reassure her.

She looked at him with wide eyes and her cheeks flushing immediately.

"It's ok, El" he started, although his throat was extremely dry. "I am the one who asked you to keep this quiet."

She nodded, looking discouraged, and her forehead became all scrunched like she was trying really hard to put her thoughts together. "I just..." she murmured, still not finishing her sentence.

He didn't talk, giving her the space to figure out what she wanted to say, but he couldn't help to feel a little worried. Was she regretting their 'friendship'? Was she thinking on giving up on him?

Before she could speak again or before he could give voice to his thoughts, the bell rang, startling them. Mike's quickly pulled away his hand and El immediately stood up walking away from him, without even saying goodbye.

He felt his chest tightening as he saw her disappear in the crowd of students, with a weird expression of confusion and pain hanging on her face. Nothing of what had just happened made sense to him.

Something bubbled in his head until Mike decided to skip fourth period and, well, he just skipped the rest of the school day, his grey and heavy cloud of thoughts not leaving him alone. He rode his bike, fast, so fast that his legs were so close to just give up at one point, praying him to stop, even just for a second and give them a break. But he didn't stop. He kept going, pushing down all his feelings and the disappointments. An idiot that was what he was, a pathetic idiot. He fell into her trap, he believed in her and... everything was

crumbling down.

Nothing made sense, but it had been his fault. She wasn't like him, nobody was like him. He was a loser and that was what he was going to be for the rest of his life.

How could he have thought that she could have been the solution? How could he have let her in, in such a short time? Because that was what had happened. He had met her not even a week ago and he had already been so overwhelmed by her that he had forgot everything else.

Mike was really good at pushing everything down, it had been his thing since day one, but then El... it was just wrong. So damn wrong.

He arrived in front of his house, dropped his bike and went inside slamming hard the door, not caring if his mom was home or if anyone else was there.

His room looked like heaven, when he got in. Mike locked himself inside and started to pace around.

He wasn't mad at her, he didn't even know how to be mad at her. She was perfect, he was the broken one. It was his fault.

Mike paced in circles until he felt dizzy and had to sit on his bed. Panting, feeling like he was going to explode. So many emotions all at once, he just couldn't handle them.

Why couldn't he be like everybody else? Why was it so hard for him? Just... why?

He had no idea a long he sat in there, his head in his hands and tears falling down his eyes. Mike knew that at one point he needed to stop and find a way to put everything away in the box, but he didn't have any strength left in that moment.

It had been a very weird and persistent noise that, somehow, pulled him out from his own storm. Confused and convinced that he was having an hallucination, Mike weakly stoop up, his legs almost Jell-o from riding his bike like crazy.

*Tic!*

Silence.

*Tic!*

Silence again.

*Tic!*

He walked to his window, first thing he noticed it was that darkness had covered everything; second thing there was a shadow standing in his backyard.

*Tic!*

Third thing, that shadow was throwing things.

Mike opened the window and tried, sticking out his head, to understand what, or better, who was the crazy person throwing little stones.

"Psss! Mike!"

His breath got caught in his throat, it was her. But what... how was she there? What was she doing there?

He felt the panic rising up again. *No, no, no.*

"Mike, can you come down?" her voice was low but he could hear her loudly. "Please." She added.

First thing he did was to shake his head, he couldn't go through another refusal, but of course she couldn't see him. He didn't know how to speak, shock and fear running in his body.

"If you don't come down I will find a way to come up!"

Why did she sound so... desperate?

"Please" El begged again. "Just for a minute."

He should have said no, he should have closed the window and

ignore her for the rest of his life, but before he could stop himself, he opened the door. There was something, like a string, that was pulling him out until, somehow, he ended up outside.

*Idiot.*

"Hey." El's whisper was barely audible.

Mike didn't say anything, staring his feet, he couldn't trust himself in that moment.

"You skipped school." She told him and then she sighed, a tired sigh.

For the first time, the silence between them was weird and heavy, Mike didn't like it.

"Can we..." El began unsure. "Can we talk?"

He shrugged but saw her nodding. "Good, uhm... we could go in my car? It's freezing, right now."

Another shrug however, when El started to walk, he followed her, that string pulling him all over again.

They got in, in silence. El's hands grabbed the steering wheel so hard that Mike could see her knuckles becoming white.

He honestly had no clue on why she wanted to talk to him, wasn't everything already clear enough?

"Mike" she said quietly, her voice breaking and quivering. "I'm sorry."

A stabbing pain in his chest started to form at her words.

"Please, please look at me."

He couldn't face her, too coward.

"I'm sorry, I really am. I shouldn't have left you like that, I know what you think, I know that you must... hate me, and you should hate me, but I need you to know that I am sorry."

Mike's eyes started to burn again, but he had no intentions to cry

again, El sniffled and he knew that, on the other hand, she wasn't going to keep her tears trapped.

"You hurt me." His voice came out croaked and unexpected. "I thought..."

"I know, I saw the look on your face and I knew I screwed up. You trusted me and I... acted like a bitch."

He heard her sigh again, like she was having troubles at breathing and collecting her thoughts. It was the same thing that had happened earlier today and, for the first time that night, Mike looked at her; her eyes were closed but tears were still streaming down her face.

The anger that he had felt until that moment melted away, leaving him worried and with the desire to pull her in his arms and not letting her go never again.

She started speaking before him, her eyes still closed, like she couldn't look directly at him and that, seemed to comfort her somehow.

"I don't know what it is happening to me. I... After my mom died, I spent my life trying to have everything figure out, no more surprises and having always a plan in case something was going to go wrong. My papa, he... gave me a plan, something to follow, something easy that didn't require any effort or any thinking." She paused to catch her breath and Mike stuck his nails on the back of his hand, trying desperately to not touch her like he wanted to do.

"He picks my classes, my after school activities, my hobbies, my clothes, my books and... and my friends. I have all planned out and it sticks to my own plan, nothing new so I can be safe."

She shook her head, like she couldn't believe her own words. "And then... then you arrived." Her voice, which had been harsh until that moment, changed and became suddenly sweet.

"I used to spend time in detention so I could avoid hanging out with Troy, I've never seen anyone there, but then the other day I saw you and..." El opened her eyes, meeting his. "You surprised me."

They stared at each other for what it felt like a lifetime; El's eyes so soft that made his heart pound so hard in his chest.

"I don't know what it is going on." She admitted softly looking away. "This morning I... I was so excited to go to school I arrived fifteen minutes earlier. I usually arrive late so I can get detention." El chuckled and he found himself smiling a little. "I started to look for you and when I couldn't find you I thought about leaving you that little note in your locker because I thought... I don't know what I was thinking, I just wanted to do it. But then, at lunch time..." her tone becoming small "I was with the others and I just couldn't stop thinking about you, about Saturday and how you... listened to me, or how we both talked and I felt like I was choking and I had to find you." She was speaking faster and faster and Mike couldn't help but feeling bad for her, he knew what she was talking about.

"I left them, and I never leave, never. But I needed you and when I saw you sitting on the stairs I... I felt like..." she struggled trying to find the words.

"Like you could breathe again?" Mike offered quietly.

El turned to face him incredulity written all over her face. But she nodded. "Yes."

He had no idea what was going on, a part of him was telling him that he was imagining everything, the other part was telling him to just give up and leave, however, a third one, that was literally yelling at him, kept him there and was pushing him to talk to her and maybe figure out what the hell was going on.

"That was the moment when I understood that something wasn't going right, that it was interfering with my perfect plan, or what I thought it was a perfect plan."

He couldn't help to look at her and, even if she was crying and she had traces of mascara on her cheeks, she was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen in his life.

"I started to think how it was possible that you, someone that I met a week ago and that I barely talked to, could make me feel such a...

strong feeling, such a need to spend time with you and know you and such a strong connection that... I have never felt before. I got mad at myself and I got scared because I let you in without even realizing it."

He felt like her words had just stabbed him, the same words and thoughts that had been on his mind all day.

Something started to make sense in Mike's head; he believed her, for whatever reason he did, and he knew what she was talking about because... well, he was feeling the same things with her.

El was looking at him, waiting for him to collect his own thoughts and elaborate her words.

His mind was working so fast that he didn't even know what was going on.

"I didn't tell you all of that so we can come back to where we were, or because I wanted to impress you, I just thought you needed an explanation and if you want me out of your life, that's completely fine."

"Wait, what?" he asked looking at her. "I don't want you out of my life." Mike stated quickly, without even thinking, but as soon as the words left his mouth he knew they were true.

Everything he had felt that afternoon was because of his irrational fear of losing her. "But" he added, and the small smile that had appeared on her face, faded away quickly. "I need to understand what it is going on, *we*, need to understand."

"Do we have to do it now?" she asked "Can't we just... live it?"

Mike knew that at one point they had to talk about it, but for that night, they both had enough. So he nodded and saw her smiling and wiping away a tear from her cheek.

"Mike" El called gently. "Can you forgive me?"

He took a long and deep breath, it wasn't all her fault. "I overreacted too, El, I... I am not like the rest of the world, you know? I just... I thought that you were already tired of me and I completely freaked

out. It was my fault too and I am really sorry."

Mike heard her laugh and frowned confused. "What's funny?"

"I took out my frustration on you, you didn't freak out on me, I treated you badly, you had every right to be mad. You don't need to apologize."

"Well, I..." he started but El interrupted him. "Shush, Wheeler, stop being a gentleman."

He smirked, he loved when she was so bossy.

"So, do you forgive me?" she tried again, a little glimpse of hope in her voice.

Acting on some weird instinct, Mike reached for one of her hands and intertwined their fingers together, smiling at the unusual thrill that the simple gesture caused him.

He finally looked up, finding El sharing the same kind of smile. He knew he could get hurt, he knew it was something dangerous and unknown, but he also knew that he had always lived in a box, too afraid of getting out. He wanted to start living and for reasons that he didn't know, he wanted to do it with El.

"Yes" he announced. "I forgive you."

And when El smiled brightly and tighten his hand, he knew he had made the right decision.

## 6. Chapter 5

### Chapter 5

It had been exactly a month since their talk in the car, it was almost Winter break, three more days, and both Mike and El couldn't wait to finally have two weeks off, so they could finally relax in peace.

The past weeks had been the happiest weeks of Mike's life; he just couldn't remember the last time that he had felt so... light. They had basically spent every possible moment together, having almost their own routine. Since El had started to arrive punctual pretty much every day, she didn't have detention anymore and had started to spend almost every afternoon with Mike. To do it, though, she had to lie to Troy and his group, coming up with excuses every time, but she had reassured him thousands of times and told him that she didn't care.

Benny's was their secret spot, they would meet there after school and study, talk or just hang out together. Plus, El had decided that Saturday was their 'special day'; at first, Mike wasn't sure of what she meant or what they were supposed to do, but at the end it only meant that they would just spend some time together. They would usually go outside Hawkins, trying to avoid everyone and just enjoying their time without worrying too much.

Mike was learning so much about her that sometimes was too intoxicating, but he couldn't help noticing even the littlest detail. He had found out that every time she needed to sneeze, she would pinch her nose and make this cute squeak that made him smile; he had learned that she didn't like math or science but loved English; he had noticed that when she wasn't understanding something, she would scrunch her forehead and two little lines would always appear in the middle of it. He had also seen the way she would become all tense and a little defensive when they were talking about her papa or her past, even though they never talked about it, unless she was the one mentioning it.

El was slowly becoming his drug and the thing was terrifying but also very nice at the same time. After that first morning, almost a month

ago, the girl had started to leave notes to him every morning, always different from the others; she would write him jokes, or leaving supportive comments when he was having a hard day; wishing him good luck if he had a test; it was their thing and he kept all those papers saved in a book, cherishing them like they were the most precious gold.

Even his mother had told him that there was something different with him, he had ignored her (of course), however her words were still playing in his mind. It had been weird to hear his mom telling him that he had 'a strange sparkle in his eyes', he wasn't used to hear good things. Well, if he had to be honest with himself, he had stopped to listen to both his parents a long time ago and now he was just so used to push them out that, surprise had been the only response to her comment. Mike had felt, for the first time in years, like she cared for him when she had noticed that and yes, there was something, or better, someone, that was slowly changing him, but he had no intentions on telling her that.

El always tried to join for lunch, she had told him that she hated to see him alone, but it wasn't possible every day, mostly because neither of them wanted Troy to find out. Luckily, though, one afternoon while he was talking to her, and he had mentioned that he didn't have a place where to have lunch anymore, she had told him that maybe he could use the janitor's closet. Mike, at first, felt a little bit offended... seriously? But she quickly clarified, as soon as she had seen his expression falling. El explained that the closet was kind of nice, spacious enough to have a bench and a little window and that nobody would bother him. When he had asked her how she knew, El had blushed and Mike dropped the subject not sure if he really wanted to know, in spite of that he decided to follow her advice and that was where he was spending his lunch time now.

He was sitting inside the 'closet', which was definitely bigger than a normal one, finishing a History essay due in two hours, it wasn't his fault if he forgot about it!

Mike was so focused on the piece of paper that, when the door of the closet got slammed pretty hard, he almost died on the spot.

*What the fu....*

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit."

Mike stared at the guy in front of him, who was too busy on pacing around to even realize that he wasn't alone, and tried to understand what the hell was going on.

The boy, around his age, was wearing a green t-shirt and a pair of jeans and on his head, pushing down his brown curly (*very curly!*) hair, he had a white-red-blue hat.

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit." He repeated and Mike thought about, maybe, coughing, clearing his voice to announce his presence? Just so he would notice him. But before he could say a word, the guy turned around and faced him.

"Oh shit!" he yelled, his hand flying on his chest. "You scared me, man!"

"Oh... ehm... sorry?" Mike whispered perplexed.

"Oh Jesus" he said again, calmer. "Don't do it, next time." And with that he walked towards him and sat down next to Mike, who was seriously ready to run away.

"Man, girls are complicated, aren't they?" the guy asked shaking his head. "I mean, of course they are, but I never thought they were going to be THIS complicated! It's insane."

Mike looked at him, what was he supposed to do? "I guess?" he said. "What happened?"

"What happened? Man! Shit happened! Oh I am such in deep shit!" he exclaimed standing up and startling Mike again. "I asked Stacey out, that's what happened!"

Mike nodded. "Ok... did she say no?"

"What?! No!"

"So she said yes?"

"No!" he answered, and Mike frowned. "Well, I don't know what she

said." He admitted sheepishly.

"How don't you know?"

"Well, that's the shit, man! I run away before she could answer, I like totally freaked out."

"Oh..." it made sense. "I'm sorry." Mike offered, it was shit.

"Yeah, well it's ok, I am just going to tell her that I had to... save a puppy or something."

Mike barely stopped himself from laughing, but when the other guy smiled, he let it go and they both laughed at the weird situation.

"I'm Dustin, by the way." He said offering his hand, and Mike awkwardly accepted, shaking it.

"I'm Mike."

"Cool, hi Mike." Dustin said smiling and then he looked around and back again at Mike. "What are you doing here? Why are you here alone?" he asked sitting down again.

Mike blushed hard. *Here we go*, he thought. "Ehm... I'm Mike Wheeler?"

Dusting looked at him confused. "Who?"

"You know, frog-face?" Mike murmured looking at his feet.

"Oh cool, well, I'm toothless." He said nonchalantly.

"Uh?"

"You know, because I have cleidocranial dysplasia, it means that my bones are growing slowly, and so my teeth, but now I do have them! Look!" and he opened his mouth showing them to Mike. "So, when I didn't have teeth, people used to call me toothless but now I have these pearls!"

"Oh, yes, they're cool."

"Yeah, I know, they are pretty awesome!" he agreed excited. "But you still haven't told me what are you doing in this shitty place."

"Hiding from the rest of the world?"

Dustin nodded, like he actually understood what Mike meant. "Well, yeah sometimes it sucks."

They were both silent, but just for a few seconds, because Dustin stood up pretty unexpectedly, turning around and looking at the other guy. "So, enough mopping around, let's go eat with the others!"

"Wait, what?" Mike could feel panic rising and spreading through his body.

"Yeah, let's go! You have been shitting around for too long! I'll introduce you to the rest of the group." He looked so excited, like he just had the best idea in the entire world.

"No, I'm sorry, I can't. Troy will be there and..."

"Troy? As Troy Harrington?" the other guy interrupted.

"Yeah, him."

"Oh, shut up! He doesn't have lunch in the cafeteria anymore!"

"What?"

"Yeah! He is like, with this girl and they go make out somewhere, he is never around! Come on, man, stop shitting me and move your ass!" he finished his sentence while opening the door and with his hand gesturing to get out of there.

Mike thought about it for a whole minute, his mind running wild, trying to find every possible con to the situation, but Dustin's impatience was so annoying that he ended up picking up his things and following the weird guy he had just met, before he could even stop himself.

"Good job, Mike, that's how we do it!"

He just faked a smile and nodded, it couldn't hurt to try... could it?

They stepped into the cafeteria and Mike, even if she was far away and was giving him her back, recognized her familiar curls and her laugh, his heart stopped for second, wondering what she was going to think when she would notice that he was there.

He walked side by side with Dustin, the fear of being left alone in that place scaring him to death, but he really wanted to try, he wanted to be normal.

"Here we are!" the guy said indicating a table where there were already three people, who all looked up and stared at Mike. "Guys, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Frog-face." Dustin said smiling, and then looked at him and started to point to his friends. "She is MadMax, and the only girl in the group."

"Lucky me." She whispered. The girl had red hair, was really pale and was wearing a sweatshirt that was at least twice her actual size.

"He is Midnight." Dustin told him indicating the black boy sitting next to the girl. The guy was giving Mike a suspicious look that made him feel almost uncomfortable. "Don't worry, he is actually a sweet guy when he wants to."

*Yeah, right?*

"And last one, Fairy, or was it zombie-boy? I lost track of your nickname, man, sorry."

The last guy was a very tiny boy who had become red when Dustin had mentioned him, he wasn't looking at Mike, playing with his food and avoiding eye contact. "He's very shy with new people, but when he starts to speaks... man, he never shuts up!"

Dustin invited him to sit down and, he took place next to the only guy he knew... well, sort of.

"So, where the hell have you been?" Midnight asked, his voice kind of pissed, then he turned to Mike. "My real name is Lucas, by the way and she is Max and Will."

"I'm Mike." He said. *Calm down, man.*

"Well, *Lucas*" Dustin started "I was trying to ask Stacey out, but I things turned out to be a little more complicated and that's when I met this dude!"

"Where were you?" the girl asked looking at Mike.

"He was in the janitor's closet." Dustin answered while taking out a bag with food from his backpack.

"I asked him, not you, you dumbass!"

"Well, sorry! But you are probably making him super uncomfortable!"

Max sat down straight and got closer to Dustin. "Oh and why is that? You idiot!"

Mike stared at them while the two kept arguing, it made him smile; it wasn't like they were actually fighting, it seemed more like they were comfortable enough with one another to just mess around, knowing that none of them was actually going to get mad.

"Why were you in the janitor's closet?" a voice asked, stopping Dustin and Max.

Mike saw Will blushing again, but there was a concerned look on his face.

"Oh, I just... it's safer than staying in public places." He explained but to his surprise, all of them nodded in understanding.

"He's afraid of Troy." Dustin added while chewing a cookie.

"Dustin!" Max yelled again.

They started to scream at each other again, but none of the group cared: Lucas was too busy with his phone and Will simply smiled at the two.

Mike, for the first time since he had stepped into the cafeteria, had a change to look around, nobody cared if he was there, everybody was

busy with their own things or chatting with their friends and for a minute he thought that maybe he had been too scared when he shouldn't have been.

His eyes were wandering around the tables of the room, absorbing what he missed for so long; he suddenly stopped when he found her. Even if she was a few feet away, he could still see her clearly. She was sitting on the table, her legs were hanging loose and she was talking to a girl with long and black hair. El wasn't really into the conversation, he could see it from the way her fingers were playing with her hair, a gesture she usually did when she was mostly spacing out.

Although she was probably just rolling her eyes due to the frustration of the situation, their eyes found each other's. Mike's heart sped up, like it usually did every time he saw her, he just couldn't control himself.

El's eyes became huge, as if she couldn't really believe what she was seeing; he saw her opening her mouth and closing it, like she was seriously astonished. Mike couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction, it was cute, but she recomposed quickly, and showed him the biggest smile ever.

"Man, what are you looking at?" Dustin's voice brought him back to reality.

"Uh?" Mike asked confused, his mind still focused on El's smile.

"Are you sure he is not crazy or anything?" Max whispered to Dustin.

"I mean" Mike started, anticipating the other guy. "Your nickname is 'mad', so...."

Everybody stared at him shock on their faces, before bursting into a very loud laugh.

"Man" said Lucas chocking on his breath. "He already knows you!"

Mike found himself relaxing and laughing with them, a warm feeling rising in his chest, he liked them and they liked him.

A few minutes later, when the bell rang interrupting their weird theories on why Dustin had run away from Stacey like a little girl, they all snorted annoyed, but stood up from the table and started to gather their things.

"You know," Will said surprising everyone. "You should definitely hang out with us, Mike."

"Yeah, you should!" Dustin agreed smiling. "So we can bother Max together!"

Mike didn't really know what to say, he felt truly touched and at the same time he was having a hard time at believing that everything that was happening was actually true.

"And if it helps," Max said interrupting his thoughts. "We are all losers here."

Lucas glanced at the girl pretending to be offended. "You seriously hurt my feelings, Max."

They all laughed and Mike knew that he just couldn't say no. "Sure, guys, I'd like to."

"Awesome!" Dustin almost yelled and making Mike laugh again.

When they parted, before going to class, they all made Mike promised that he would have lunch with them again, the next day, and he had agreed, excited at the idea.

He was half away to class when he realized that he didn't have a book. Annoyed, he walked all the way back to his locker and to his surprise, when he opened it another note flew down. Quickly he picked it up and stared the big smiling face that was on it.

El had probably left it after lunch, since she had already left him one that morning. He smiled at it and put it away, grabbing his book and shutting his locker.

Hallways were almost desert and he knew he was late, so he walked a little faster. He was almost there when suddenly he felt someone following him.

"Hey, frog-face, why so late? Mommy didn't tell you to arrive punctual in class?"

Troy's voice was closer than he thought, the blood in his veins froze and even if he wanted to run as far as possible, his legs stopped working paralyzing him.

"So what are you up to? It's been a while since we talked!"

He was in front of him now, Mike didn't even know how he did that. He couldn't dare to look at him, so he stared at the ground, hoping that he would just do it fast.

"Nothing to tell me?" he asked and Mike couldn't help to think about El, maybe he had found out?

"Come on, Wheeler, why don't you talk to me?" Troy was just a few inches away from him, Mike gulped, his heart beating so fast that he could hear it in his ears.

It happened fast. And he pushed him. Hard. His back against the locker making Mike whine.

"You are such a pussy, Wheeler. Always so weak, it's just so easy to break you!" Troy laughed.

He pushed him again one, two, three times. Every time harder than the previous one. Mike wanted to react, he really wanted to but the fear was always keeping him stuck, turning him into a puppet.

With another push, Troy made him bump his head against the cold metal and Mike cried in pain.

"Maybe with that your useless brain will start to work again." He whispered right to his ear, sounding like a snake and then he left, walking away proudly.

Mike collapsed on the floor, his legs not able to support him anymore. His back was already hurting and his head pounding. He could feel tears in his eyes and despite not having any strength left, he managed to bring his knees to his chest and curl himself.

He felt like he couldn't breathe, his lungs not able to work properly and making him gasp for air.

A part of him was telling him to get up, that people were going to see him and that he needed to move from there, but he just couldn't do it, his body was not responding.

He zoomed out, shutting down his mind and running away. He had no idea of how much time had passed, he was just far away.

That's how he didn't notice the pair of gentle hands that were trying to wake him up from that nightmare; that's how he didn't notice that someone had wrapped him in a hug; he didn't noticed the sweet voice murmuring *I got you, it's ok Mike, I got you now*. He couldn't sense anything because he wasn't there.

But somehow a small part of his brain noticed the familiar smell of roses that was surrounding him and he let it in, comforting him and holding on to it like his life was depending from that.

## 7. Chapter 6

### Chapter 6

When he opened his eyes, a bright light coming from the window in front of him, made him wince. Disorientated Mike looked around, first thing he noticed was that he was lying on a bed and a pink blanket was covering him; second thing, he had no idea where he was. He tried to pull himself up but his body refused, making him groan when he felt a sharp pain going through his back. He blinked a few times, looking around: it was a room, a girly one, considering that everything was pink, but nothing seemed familiar enough to make him understand where in the world he was.

"Hey" a soft voice made him turn his head and on the other side of the bed, sat on a chair he found El, her expression worried and her eyes a little puffy. Was she crying? "How are you feeling?"

"El?" Mike spoke, his voice cracking. "Where... am I?"

"You are in my room, I... well, it's my house." She answered standing up and sitting on the bed close to him.

"Why?"

"Do you... do you remember anything of what happened?"

He tried to focus but the constant pounding in his head was making it more difficult than usual. "I... remember..." he brought his hand to his temple and started to massage it, hoping the pain would fade a little. "Uhm..." the throbbing so persistent that even talking was hard.

"I have some painkillers if you want." El told him immediately, picking up something from the nightstand close to the bed and offering him two white pills and a glass of water.

He accepted them with a grateful look, swallowing the medicine and drinking some water. "Thanks."

"Don't worry." She reassured him smiling a little.

Mike closed his eyes for a second as he tried to get some of his memory back. Then, slowly he started to remember walking alone in the hallways, Troy pushing him against the lockers and then... then blanking out.

"Wait... how did I get here? Why aren't we at school?" he suddenly asked opening his eyes.

"I drove you here." El whispered looking at her hands.

"Wh... I don't understand. Have you... Did I pass out?"

"Sort of..."

Mike stared at her, disbelief, confusion and a lot of other mixed emotions going through his mind. She noticed the way he was looking at her, trying to find the answers he was looking for, so with a sigh she started to tell him what had happened.

"I share Math with Troy... he is always late and usually I don't care, but this time when he arrived, he looked... happy? Then he sat down and started to tell everybody that he had found you alone in the hallways and that... he... had hurt you." Mike saw her wiping away a tear, her voice sounded so broken that made him wanted to comfort her. "I couldn't believe him. But I was worried and needed to check on you, so... I waited a minute and then I told the teacher that I wasn't feeling well and run out... and... you were on the floor, I... you... you were having a panic attack, I think..." She couldn't even finish the story as her sobs were interrupting her. Mike felt his heart breaking and tried to sit down so he could be closer. "No, no, Mike, you have to lay down." El immediately said pushing him back.

"No, I'm fine." He tried, barely hiding the grimace of pain that spread on his face.

"Shut up, you have to lay down ok?" she sounded scary even when she was crying.

He did as she said, feeling something that he couldn't quite understand too many emotions at once, too many feelings that were confusing and paralyzing.

Mike tried to focus on El, the way she was looking at him with worry, she wasn't smiling and there were tears on her cheeks. His heart broke all over again: she was sad because of him, because he hadn't been able to defend himself, to get up from the floor on his own. She was upset, maybe because she was finally realizing what a loser he was. There was no way he could escape, he knew it now, he was going to be stuck in that maze for the rest of his life. Being assaulted and laughed and hurt and alone and...

"Stop." El whispered, as if she knew, as if she could read his mind and feel what he was going through. "Stop it, Mike."

He couldn't, he just couldn't. Mike was going to ruin her too, he knew it, dragging her down with him except, she didn't deserve it, she needed someone better.

"We have to... we have to end this." His voice broken, speaking those words quickly.

El's face crumbled, frowning and looking at him with disbelief. "No." said firmly and strongly.

A sad smile appeared on Mike's face, she was a fighter, he, on the other end, he wasn't. "Yes, El, we... you can't stay with me."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"No, actually I don't, Mike." Her voice raising, anger coming out. "I don't understand. I... I was going to tell you that I was ready to talk to Troy and get out of their group and you... you come out with this?"

"What?" Mike looked at her. "Are you crazy? Why would you tell him that? Why do you want to get out?"

"Because of you, idiot!" she yelled standing up, her eyes filling with tears. "Because I have no intentions on seeing you hurt again!"

He shook his head, too hard, but he pushed the pain aside. "No, I won't let you do it."

"Oh you won't? Since when you decide for me? Since when you can tell me what to do?"

Mike groaned, trying to find a way to finally sit down on the damn bed, fighting his sore back, pushing himself up with his elbows, he finally managed to do it. "I'm not telling you what to do."

"Yes, yes you are!"

"And so what? You tell him that we are what? Friends? And then he'll start to beat *you* up? To push *you* around? And you will get hurt because of *me*?!"

"He won't do it." She tried to sound sure but her voice quivered a little.

"Oh and you know this how?"

El didn't answer, she turned to look outside the window. Although he was furious, hurt and somehow upset, he knew he was being an asshole and also knew that she didn't deserve any of the things he was doing and saying.

"Do you know what was it like to see you like that?" She spoke calmer than before, sadness in her voice. "It was like you were a ghost, Mike, you weren't even there... You looked so far away and you couldn't breathe..." she stopped when a sob escape. "You are smart, but sometimes you can't see what's in front of you."

He didn't know what to say, what to think.

"You want me to stay away from you? Tell me why, give a good reason, something that I don't know, something convincing and I'll do it, I will disappear from your life." She turned to face him, staring at him in the eyes.

Suddenly Mike was speechless, instead of saving her, he was hurting her even more.

It was his fault. It was his fault she was hurt. He was the problem...

*Your fault.*

*Your fault.*

*Your fault.*

He didn't know what to say, what to do and unexpectedly he couldn't breathe; just like earlier, he felt himself slipping away.

El saw it coming maybe even before he did and run to his side, hugging him, tightly.

"I'm sorry" he murmured, as he pressed his face against her neck. "I'm sorry." He wasn't even sure what he was apologizing for.

She didn't say anything, just held him.

"El, I'm sorry." He repeated like a broken CD player.

"It's ok." She whispered softly in his ear. "It's ok, babe."

It took him a few minutes to calm down and be able to breathe normally again, but at the end he did it.

"You need to know that you have no right, Mike, do you understand?" El told him while her arms were still wrapped around him. "You can't tell me that you what to end this when..." she was almost crying again. "When this is the only thing that is keeping me sane."

"What?" he asked breathless, parting a little and staring her.

El chuckled, and run her finger through his messy and curly hair. "Isn't it pretty obvious?"

Mike lost his breath again, but now for a completely different reason. The look in her eyes was something that he had never seen before; they were soft and... brighten up with something that he couldn't really understand.

"I..." he started but couldn't continue, what was she saying?

"Maybe we should talk about this when you are not... so... shaken up." She gently pushed him back, so he was laid on the bed once again. He couldn't stop looking at her: what was she talking about?

What did she mean?

"Rest, ok? I will wake you up in an hour or so and then I'll take you home."

Mike just nodded, feeling like a baby, confused and tired; his eyes surprisingly heavy. He fell asleep watching El, without realizing that one of his hands was trapped between hers.

When El had waked him up, he had looked at her almost more confused than the first time. The painkillers that she had given him must have done a pretty good job, he thought. He had felt so numb, like he was trap in the deepest slumber.

She had helped him to get into the car and had tried to drive slowly, trying to avoid any bump.

"Do you need help to get inside?" El asked, parking in front of his house, her expression worried.

"No, I don't think so." He could barely feel his legs, but had no intentions on revealing that to her.

"You sure?" she asked again studying him.

Mike nodded and went to open the door of the car. "Oh, wait." El stopped him. "I have something for you."

He waited while she grabbed a box from the back and when she gave it to him, well, he didn't know what to do.

"What's that for?" frowning he just stared at the wrapped box that she had put on his lap.

El blushed, and Mike, even if his thoughts weren't very coherent, couldn't help to think that she really was the cutest thing on earth.

"It's present." She said. "I wanted to give it to you for Christmas, but I think now it's better."

"But you didn't have too." Now it was his turn to become embarrassed. "And I don't have anything..."

"I know, I know." El interrupted him. "I wanted to get you one and I did it, you don't have to give me anything. Just... keep it, ok?"

"Should I open it now or...?"

"You can open it, if you want."

It took forever to unwrap the little box, his hands weren't collaborating with him, trembling like crazy.

"Is this...?" he whispered surprise in his voice.

"I thought that, now that you have me and those guys you had lunch with today, you might need one." Her smile was so bright and excited that for a second he felt happy too, but then, when he looked down, he knew that there was no way he could keep it.

"El, I can't accept it..." he told her, but she started to shake her head immediately.

"No, Mike, you keep it."

"It's a phone, El! It's like super expensive!"

He saw her laughing, more like she was laughing in relief. "I didn't pay for it, if that's what you worry about, silly. It was my dad's, he gets like hundreds of phones from companies because of his job and he just doesn't use them."

"El, I..."

She interrupted him again. "It has its own plan and you don't have to do anything else, I mean you don't have to use it if you don't want to, but it's a safe phone and I am the only one who knows the number."

Mike didn't answer, he just looked down at the box, trying to decide what to do. He already knew that fighting with her was a lost battle from the start, there was no way he could say no to El; on the other side he wasn't sure if it was a good idea.

"I'll keep it..." he started after a while and saw El jumping excited on her seat clapping her hands together. "At one condition."

She stopped staring at him suspiciously. "Go on."

"You will give me your number so we can keep in touch." *WHAT?! Mike Wheeler, what did you just say?!*

He seriously had no idea where that came from, but when he noticed El's smirk, he felt less panicked. "My number is already in." she told him.

Mike opened his mouth but wasn't able to say anything, she was going to be the death of him.

"Cool, ok, ehm." He felt himself flush. "It's better if I go now."

"Try to rest, ok? And let me know if you are coming tomorrow."

"I will." He said getting slowly out of the car. "And thank you for the phone." he remembered gesturing to his pocket.

"Of course, Mike." She smiled and as he closed the door and saw her driving away, he stopped to think that there was no way he deserved someone like El.

He walked inside dragging his legs like they were weights and hoping to be able to sneak upstairs and just sleep some more. But when he opened the front door he heard her mom laughing and a familiar voice coming from the kitchen. Incredulous Mike rushed inside and sighed in pure relief when he saw that she was actually there and he hadn't imagined it.

"Nancy." He whispered.

His sister immediately turned to face him and smiled widely at him. "Mike!" She almost jumped on him and he stiffed when they hugged, the pain still there and still bothering him.

Nancy noticed it as soon as he winced. "You ok?"

"Yeah, yeah it's nothing." He hugged her back, not giving her the chance to ask more questions.

God, he had missed her so much. "I didn't know you were coming

today."

"I finished my exams earlier and since winter break starts tomorrow for us, I decided to surprise you." She explained.

Mike felt like he could explode, he needed her so much.

"Why don't we go upstairs and talk?" Nancy whispered in his ear. He agreed right away.

"Dinner will be ready soon!" his mom yelled while they were going in his room, but they both ignored her.

Nancy closed the door and they both sat on the floor, like they always did when they were kids.

"You ok?" she asked again. "Did something happen?"

His sister was the only one who actually cared about him and the situation he was in. While his mom pretended not to see and his father just ignored him and accused him to be weak, Nancy was always there for him, she had always been. He had fallen apart when she had left for college, but he knew he couldn't keep her there forever.

"Troy got me today." Mike admitted softly.

"Shit, is it bad?"

"No, no, I think I am just going to have some bruises for the next few days but I am ok."

"You don't look well, Mike."

He looked down, avoiding her eyes. "I sort of... had... a panic attack?"

"What?!" she yelled startling him. "Why you didn't call me? You could have asked at school!"

"I'm ok, really." He tried to reassure her. "It didn't last long and El helped me and..."

"El? Who's El?"

"Oh..." *crap*. "Well, she is..." what was she? "A friend?"

Nancy smirked. "'A friend' ok, I didn't know about this 'friend'"

"It's a new friend."

He wanted to kick his own ass, of course he had to blush and become red as a tomato.

"So El helped you?"

"Yeah, she, uhm, found me and we went to her house, I sort of passed out, so..."

Mike saw his sister nodding, although she seemed deep in some kind of weird thoughts.

"I met new people today, though!" he exclaimed trying to change the subject.

And it worked. "You did?" she sounded surprised but excited. "Who are they?"

"It's a group of guys, and a girl, they are pretty fun and... they are like me."

"Who cares about that! Tell me more!"

They spent more than two hour on the floor, skipping dinner and talking about everything, changing subjects randomly; Nancy told him everything about college, how beautiful New York was, all the people that she was meeting and all the things she saw. Mike listened to her, trying to imagine in his head what she was telling him, trying to imagine how his life was going to be as soon as he would get out of that town.

Nancy was giving him hope and that was exactly what he needed in that moment.

When they told each other good night, Mike hugged her again,

thankful to finally have his sister back even if it was for a little bit.

"And tomorrow we are going to talk more about this El." Nancy told him grinning before disappearing in her room. Mike smiled, of course she hadn't forgotten.

Finally alone, he remembered the little thing in his pocket; he grabbed it and stared at it not knowing what to do. It had been a nice present and he trusted El, but there were a lot of what ifs in his head.

With a sigh he pressed the little button on the top and the screen turned on. It took it a few seconds but eventually a weird wallpaper of mountain appeared and it also started to buzz, showing the notification of three messages.

Mike felt like an idiot for a second, he really had no idea how it worked. He pressed the icon and saw 'El' written on the screen. He opened them immediately, his heart beating fast.

*"I hope you enjoy the phone!"* said the first.

*"I don't know if you are sleeping, I just wanted to know how you were feeling, let me know when you wake up!"* he smiled a little at the second message, she wanted to know how he was!

*"FYI, I went to pick up your bike at school after I dropped you off and left it in your backyard. Hope you will feel better tomorrow!"*

Oh shit! He had completely forgotten about his bike! As he realized that El had saved his ass once more, he also thought about the fact that he hadn't thanked her for everything she had done.

He touched the screen again and started to type the message: *'You are a life saver! Thank you so much... like, for everything you are doing for me. I am sorry I attacked you earlier, I was mad and took it out on you, you didn't deserve it... Anyways, thank you again!'*

Mike press sent and waited, exhaustion hitting him and the pain starting to come back again as the effect of the drugs started to fade away. But he wanted to wait for her answer, *if* she was going to answer him.

Five minutes later, when he was almost ready to give up, the phone finally buzzed; he opened the message so fast that he didn't even know how he did it.

*'I would do it all over again.'*

His heart stopped, like, literally skipped a beat or exploded, he wasn't sure but he smiled at the screen like a real idiot. Before he could reply, he got another message.

*'And I know you are sorry, but that conversation isn't over... I don't want to see you hurt again and I don't want to be part of that group anymore...'*

*'I still don't understand, but I agree, we'll talk about it...'* Mike was kind of ashamed to admit that it took him almost three minutes to write that message, he seriously needed practice.

*'You need to rest, go to bed, ok?'*

*'Ok, 'night, El'*

*"Night Mike."*

He quickly ate some leftovers, took some ibuprofen and got into his pajamas, it wasn't even nine when he went to bed, but he just couldn't handle to stay awake longer.

It was dark and quiet and he was finally dozing off, ready to get over everything that had happened that day, when the phone that was on his nightstand, buzzed again and the screen lighted up. Mike grabbed it with a snort, suddenly awake, though, when he saw that it was another message from El.

He stared it, reading those words again and again feeling confused even if everything was clear.

*'It's funny that you don't understand, because I still think that it's pretty obvious...'*

## 8. Chapter 7

### Chapter 7

"So, are you going to tell me more about her?"

Mike almost faced palmed himself, trying to understand why in the world he had agreed in the first place, to let his sister to take him to school. He knew she was going to interrogate him, he had just hopped that maybe she would have kept the questions for later.

When he had woken up that morning he had been too sore to even get down the stairs, there was no way that he was going to ride his bike all the way to school, so he had asked Nancy to give him a lift, and here he was, in her car with no way to escape her questions.

"Nance..."

"What? I want to know who is this 'friend' that helped my little brother!"

If looks could kill...

"I have already told you everything! She is friend and yesterday when I blanked out, we went to her house and then she drove me back, end of the story."

"Do you like her?" she teased.

"Do I... What?!" he was shocked. "No! I mean, yes, I mean not like that!" And he knew he had just screwed himself up.

"Like that?" she repeated with a smirk. "What does it mean?"

*Oh god!* "Nance, come on!"

"Hey! I am just asking! You are the one getting all... heated up." His face was indeed on fire.

"I am not!"

"Listen, I am not trying to make you feel uncomfortable, I just want to know more. Since I have been gone, well, we barely talk to each other." Her voice was sweet and a little nostalgic, showing him that she really wanted to know because she cared and not to bother him.

That's how Nancy was: a big sister who acted more like a mom, plus the fact that she was studying Psychology and all that crap, didn't help his position, she would always find a way to make him talk.

"Well, I met her in detention and she asked me to be friends." He didn't want to give a lot of information, though, and mostly he didn't want to explain the whole story.

Nancy nodded, like she was waiting for more. "And?"

"And what?"

"What do you guys do? Is she in the group with the other kids you told me about?"

Ah... "Ehm... no."

"Ok... so, was she new or lonely?"

"No..."

His sister turned her head and glared him. "Do I have to keep asking or will you tell me already?"

"She is... one of Troy's friends." He gave up, not able to lie to her.

"Wait, what?!" she yelled almost slamming the breaks. "Are you kidding me?!"

"It's not what you think!" Mike cleared immediately. "She is not like them."

Nancy didn't say anything, she looked like she was trying to understand the whole situation.

They were both silent and it was only when they reached school that his sister spoke again. "I want to meet her."

"What?" this was definitely the last thing he was expecting from her.

"You heard me."

"You can't." he said, they couldn't risk their friendship, he couldn't risk her. "I... I know her, ok? She is great and I can't..." he didn't finish his sentence; he couldn't tell her that if someone would find about them they would both be in a lot of troubles.

But Nancy understood, she always did. "Ok, I trust you on this, but I still want to meet her at one point." Then she grinned. "Even more if she is going to be your girlfriend!"

"Nancy!" he shouted feeling his face red again. Geez, he loved his sister but that was way too embarrassing.

She laughed loudly when he rushed out of the car, shutting the door. "Call me if you need me!" Nancy told him before driving away.

Mike walked inside, a certain amount of anxiety running through his body; he just hated that place. Trying not to be recognized through the crowd, he arrived at his locker and opened it, feeling like he was going to burst with excitement when he saw the little note. He opened it immediately, trying not to think about the fact that a piece of paper was the only thing making him happy in that moment.

*'Hey you! So glad you decided to come, thank you for your message this morning :) I really don't know why I am still writing you these notes since you have a phone, now, but honestly, who cares! I would like to talk later, maybe after school we could go to Benny's?*

*Let me know, El.'*

Talk? Why did she want to talk? Talk about what? He furrowed his eyebrows as another wave of anxiety hit him. Was it about Troy? He really didn't want to fight with her again.

As tons of different thoughts came into his mind, he didn't notice the guy standing by his side, staring him.

"How's that possible that every time I find you, you look like a truck hit you?"

Mike turned his head surprised and kind of scared, at the beginning, only to find out that Dustin and the rest of the group were watching him.

"You guys scared me." He said hiding the note.

"So what? Are you a little girl?" Max asked almost laughing.

"What are you doing here?" Mike looked at them, ignoring the redhead.

"We go to school here?" Lucas commented and Dustin started to laugh, while Max snorted.

"Guys, come on." Will emerged from behind Dustin, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on with them today." He smiled apologetic and Mike thought that he really liked the guy.

"Anyways," Dustin started as he stopped laughing. "We are here as support!"

*Uh?*

*"Uh?"*

"Yeah, you know..." Lucas explained becoming serious. "To help you."

"I know what support means." Mike said confused. "I just don't understand why."

They all looked at each other, like they didn't really know how to answer, until Will sighed. "We heard what happened yesterday."

*Oh... "I don't need your pity."* Mike answered defensive.

"Yeah, we know" Max rolled her eyes annoyed. "Nobody is giving you pity, it's just what friends do, so now stop complaining and move your ass before we are all late for class."

Mike didn't really know what to say, but before he could protest Dustin got closer and pointed at Max. "You better listen to her, I think she has her stuff and she becomes even scarier during those times."

His whisper was everything but a whisper and in fact, everyone heard him.

"Dustin!" the girl yelled.

"Shit, sorry Max!"

Mike couldn't help to laugh as they started to discuss again, he had to admit that they were hilarious.

"Hey," he heard Will's voice, lower than the shouts. "We really want to help, we've all been there."

Mike nodded, sort of touched by his words. It couldn't hurt, could it?

"What do you have now?" Will was much shorter than Mike and he kind of had to look down to meet his gaze.

"Oh... I have History."

"Ok, then let's go!" Lucas screamed interrupting the other two. Mike didn't even realize that the other guy was listening to him.

"So, is it bad?" Dustin asked looking at Mike.

"Man!" Lucas exclaimed. "Leave him alone!"

"What? I'm just worried, asshole!"

"Yeah, well maybe he doesn't want to talk about it!"

"Well, why don't you let him talk then, you son of a bitch?"

They started arguing and Mike looked at Will. "Are they always like this?"

"Sometimes they are quiet too... although I don't think I have ever seen those moments." The shorted guy joked smiling.

Mike glanced at the boys that were still discussing, he didn't mind, actually it helped with that weird feeling of worry that was part of him since day one.

He spent first period and most part of his second, thinking about El and that weird message that she had sent him the night before. When he had woke up, that morning, he had made sure to tell her that he was going to school, but before writing the actual message, he had read the other one at least another hundreds times, he wasn't sure what she meant with those words. It wasn't like he had a lot of experience with girls. How could he know what she meant? How was that obvious?

For a second he thought that maybe he could try to ask to Nancy, she was a girl herself, so she could help...right? But he really didn't want to go through the embarrassment again.

As third period arrived, Mike was ready to give up, it probably didn't mean anything so why worrying about it?

Before he knew, it was lunch time and he walked into the cafeteria, trying to find the guys. They had told him that he had to join them for lunch, no excuses accepted. They were pretty serious and he had to agree or, as Dustin said: "We are going to look for you and drag you here no matter what."

He smiled when he saw them sat at the same table where they were yesterday, already yelling at each other, but laughing at the same time.

"Yo, Mike!" Lucas smiled as he took place on the chair. "We just made a bet!"

"About what?"

"So" Dustin said cutting Lucas. "I was thinking about asking Stacey out again and they told me no..."

"Yeah, because you run away yesterday! You have already embarrassed yourself enough." Max laughed interrupting the boy, who gave her his middle finger in response.

"So the bet is that he has to ask someone else out, but without running away." Will completed rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, or without fainting."Added Lucas.

"Or throwing up." Concluded Max.

Mike was speechless, he kind of felt bad for Dustin, but he had to admit that it was a fun bet. "I bet ten bucks that he starts to scream and then runs away." He said with a smile.

"I trusted you!" the curly boy yelled while everybody started to laugh again. "I feel so betrayed, Wheeler!"

And Mike lost it too, laughing so hard that his stomach started to hurt. He really couldn't remember last time he had laugh like that.

"Ok, then, who is going to be the lucky lady?" Dustin asked once they had stopped laughing.

"Uhm... good question." Max whispered starting to look around.

They all did, and it was a stupid thing to do, but the bet was on, so...

Pretending to do the same thing, Mike stopped his gaze once he found her table, he didn't even fight the fact that his heart started to pound faster (he was almost used to that reaction), when he saw that she was watching him, on her lips the ghost of a smile.

*God, she is perfect...* he thought. *Wait what?! Oh, that's creepy!*

"Who are you staring, Wheeler?" Max snapped him out of his thoughts. "Found someone?"

"Oh... no, I..."

"Wait!" Lucas screamed startling the whole group. "I know who you can go ask to!"

"Who?!" they all exclaimed.

"Jane Brenner!" the boy answered smiling like he just had the greatest idea ever.

Mike's stomach flipped in a very bad way; they couldn't. "What? No." the only thought making him panic hard. Everybody turned to face him.

"Why not?" Lucas asked, his eyes looking at Mike, with the most suspicious look.

He didn't know why, he just knew that they couldn't. El wasn't some kind of bet, they had no right and... she was... they just couldn't. But of course he didn't say all of that aloud, he didn't even know where it had came from.

"Well..." he mumbled, looking for a good excuse. "She... isn't she Troy's friend?"

Mike saw Lucas' face relaxing a little. "He has a good point." Will said and both Max and Dustin nodded, agreeing.

"Ok, but she barely hangs out with him anymore!" Lucas continued. "And if she says yes, Dustin, well, she is pretty good looking."

"I don't know, man, I agreed on the bet but I don't want troubles." Dustin told him, seriousness in his voice. "But I have to admit that she is... pretty good."

*Keep it down, Wheeler.* Why they were talking about her like that?! She wasn't... Well, yeah she was pretty but... He couldn't help that growing bubble in his stomach that made his feel like he wanted to punch them in the face. El was out, period, they weren't allowed to talk about her in that way! *Well, you are not allowed either...* a voice whispered softly. *Oh, shut up!*

"You ok, Wheeler?" Max asked getting closer to his face studying him carefully. "You look like you are going to throw up."

"What? No, yes, I'm ok." He tried, sounding like child caught in the act of doing something he wasn't supposed to do. "It's just my headache."

The group spent the rest of their lunch time trying to find the 'perfect girl' for Dustin, but Mike, on the other hand, the was just miles away from everybody.

Since when he started to... feel that way towards El? He knew she was pretty... *beautiful*, a voice corrected him, well he had eyes too and yeah, El was ... El... but... he really didn't know.

The rest of the day flew away like a blur, too deep in thoughts to actually pay attention to anything else.

He knew he was over thinking it, but for some reason he needed to find the answers to all his questions.

"Hey, little brother!"

Mike didn't even notice Nancy standing outside the car waiting for him. "Oh, hey."

"You ok?" she immediately asked, noticing his cloudy eyes.

"What? Yes, I am just... thinking."

They got in the car quietly and before his sister started to drive she glanced at him with a worried expression.

"Ok," Nancy said after few minutes, making him jump in surprise. "I understand that you have things going on but you can't shut me out."

"I'm not" he promised. "I am just trying to figure something out."

"Is it about El?"

*How does she...* "Oh come one, Mike!" Nancy smiled tenderly. "I have been your sister for the past seventeen years, give me a little credit!"

He snorted, maybe a little annoyed by the fact that she knew him so well.

"So, what about El?" she didn't give up.

"Nothing really, I just..."

"Do you like her?"

"Oh give me a break!"

He heard her laugh and he couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes.

"Look," Nancy started. "I just want to help you." And Mike knew, she always helped him. "And I know it might be hard to admit to

ourselves that we might like someone, but if you do, well, there's nothing wrong with that."

She was right, but it was different for him, El was completely out of his reach, they weren't even supposed to be friends in the first place!

"Why don't you talk to her?"

"What?" his eyes wide. "Are you crazy!?"

It was her turn to roll her eyes, it must have been a family thing, Mike thought. "You don't have to make a declaration or tell her that you are going to love her for the rest of your life! Just ask some questions and try to understand if she likes you back!"

"I'll think about it." He murmured and snorted when saw the look of satisfaction on his sister's face.

They easily switched subject and they spent the rest of the ride talking about a new book that Nancy had found 'incredibly interesting'. Mike smiled as he realized how nerd she sounded, but he knew that he was a nerd too.

When they arrived home, he ran into his room and took out the phone from the drawer where he had hidden it that morning. There was a message that had arrived just few minutes earlier.

*'So... I'm already at Benny's, feel free to join me when you read this message.'*

Mike smiled, again, it was stupid to smile like that to a screen but, well...

*'Just got home, be there in 20'* he typed, feeling proud as he realized that he was already better at texting.

*What a stupid thought.*

He was still sore and riding his bike wasn't the best idea, but he didn't want to ask to his sister again and most important, he didn't want her there to embarrass him. Plus, he needed to think.

Mike got out of his room and went downstairs.

"Hey, I'm going out, don't wait for me." He informed his mom while grabbing his coat.

"Where are you going?" she asked without looking at him, too busy pouring wine in her glass.

"Outside." He answered and ran out, without giving her the chance to ask more.

He pedaled slowly at first, trying to understand if his body was going to be fine and when he felt no pain he went faster, letting the cold breeze hit his face and mess his black hair.

Nancy had told him that it was okay to like someone, but how could he know if he liked her?

He had never had feelings for anybody, how was he supposed to know? And then, feelings? What kind of feelings was he supposed to feel?

Of course El was special, she was smart and kind, and funny and she was always ready to cheer him up even if she was having a bad day too and when he was with her he would always lose track of time because it was just so easy to stay with her; and then there were all the times when she would smile at him and he would just... melt because that smile was just perfect; and all the times she would laugh and he would laugh too because how couldn't he? And every time she had grabbed his hand or touched him and... he would just feel that... weird spark all through his body and then... the way she always made him feel normal and... happy.

He arrived at the diner without even realizing it, his head spinning from all those thoughts. There were too many things to consider and to understand and then... then he walked in, and she was there, sitting at their table, her curls going in all directions and when she looked up and saw him and she gave him that smile that would light her eyes up like she had just seen the most amazing thing in the whole world, everything started to make sense and he lost his breath as realization hit him.

*'Isn't it pretty obvious?' her words echoing loudly in his head and... yes, it is pretty obvious,* he thought as he finally understood.

**A/N:** Hello! First of all I want to apologize for the long wait, work is driving me insane and sometimes I can't keep up, so... I'm really sorry guys! Second, I would like to thank all of you, for your support and your reviews... it really means a lot and you guys are amazing!

Until next time! :)

## 9. Chapter 8

### Chapter 8

If someone had told him that, for the first time in his whole life, he was going to deal with real teenagers problems, Mike Wheeler would have laughed at their faces. Him? With stupid problems like heartbreaks or crushes? There was no way.

But he had learnt a long time ago that life was the weirdest thing and that most of the time it would change everything you were expecting from it.

That's why he couldn't really believe the fact that he was sat in front of her, his hands sweaty and mind clouded as the realization was slowly taking its place.

"You know? I don't understand how you like math, like, it's so... confusing!"

Should he talk to her? Tell her that he... he what? How did it work?

"Like this equation, this one, look at it! Damn it doesn't make any sense!"

Maybe he should write her a letter? *What?! You are not in the 19th century!*

"And how do you solve it?!"

What if he would... what?

"I am getting a milkshake, I need something to get me through this, do you want anything?"

Nancy could help, he had already talked to her, but now things were different.

"Mike? Do you want something to eat?"

Different for him, it wasn't like everything was just going to change

because he understood that... well, that.

"Mike? You ok?"

He really had no idea what he was supposed to do. What did the rest of the world do in these situations?

"Mike!"

He finally looked up and met El's face almost in front of his; a worry expression painted all of it.

"What?" he asked confused.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, yes, why?"

"You kind of zoomed out." She explained more relaxed than before.

"Oh... I'm sorry, I was just..."

El laughed softly. "It's ok, don't worry." And then her hand got unexpectedly closer to his forehead, tugging back a lock of his messy hair.

It wasn't the first time she would do something like that, he was used to the fact that she would always find a way to reach for him or touch him. But as her fingertip brushed against his skin, Mike felt something... different.

"I saw you at lunch today, with the guys from yesterday." Her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"I saw you too."

El smiled, a relieved smile? "You looked like you were having fun."

"Yeah," he admitted with a feeling of enthusiasm that he couldn't really hide. "They are really fun and also very loud but they are really great."

"I'm glad!" and she looked genuinely happy. "What are their names? I

mean, I think I know two of them because we shared some classes last year... Will and... Luke?"

"Lucas, yeah! And then there's Dustin and Max."

El didn't say anything for and Mike wasn't sure what she was thinking, she looked like she wanted to say something else but didn't want to say it at the same time.

"What?" he asked, trying to prompt her.

She shook her head and avoided his eyes. "Maybe... I could join you tomorrow? At lunch?"

"Why would you do that?" he knew where she wanted to go with that request and had no intentions on letting her win.

"You know why." She whispered, still not looking directly at him, though.

"El, yesterday I was tired and maybe not able to discuss with you, but I am not changing my mind about it."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she was getting mad, he could feel it. "Do you really think that I am going to listen to you?"

"I don't care if you listen to me or not, I have already told you what I think about it."

"Yeah and you have no right to tell me what to do."

Mike sighed, she was really stubborn. "El, there is no way I am going to let you... ditch your group to hang out with a bunch of... losers."

"Why do you think only about what *you* want?! What about what *I* want?" she was looking at him, almost yelling. He could see that she was hurt and that he was hurting her, but that whole discussion didn't make any sense.

"And what do you want? To... lose everything you have?"

"Everything I have?" she repeated, furious. "Everything I have?! And what do I have?! A bunch of... people who go around and hurt other

people? And hurt *you*?!"

Mike took a deep breath, she was already mad, he needed to stay calm if he wanted to convince her. "I have been dealing with them for years, El, I am used to it."

"It doesn't mean anything, Mike, and the fact that you are 'so used' to it, it's just wrong."

"And so what? I have no intentions to see *you* hurt, you don't know what it means."

"I don't know?! I know what it means to be hurt! I know everything and I'm tired if you thinking that I can't handle this! I have been handling worst things than a group of angry teenagers!" by the time she was finished, there were tears in her eyes and Mike really wanted to just stop that pointless discussion and pull her in his arms.

"I know, El, and that's another reason why you shouldn't do it, you are safe, now."

"I'm far away from being safe, Mike!" she screamed and he saw Benny from the kitchen staring them concerned. Luckily the diner was empty, too early for people to have dinner.

"El..."

"No! No, Mike! I don't understand how you can ask me to stay with them! I thought you... you could understand!"

"I do, El but..."

"No you don't, you don't understand..." and with that she stood up, shutting her books closed and putting them in her bag.

"Where are you going?" Mike was up too, feeling powerless and disbelief running through his body.

"I need to think, leave me alone." She left, without even looking back and slamming the poor door as she walked to her car.

Of course he had no idea what to do, like an idiot he looked around

the diner hoping to find some kind of help and, surprisingly he found it; Ben, still in the kitchen, was frenetically indicating the door and, even if it took Mike a few seconds to understand, his feet were already moving towards El.

"El!" he shouted "Stop!"

She was almost inside and it looked like she had no intentions on listening to him.

"El, please." Panting he rushed to hold the door of the car.

"What? What do you want?!"

He hated to see her so upset and to know that he was the reason why she was crying, for the second time in less than two days. He was an ass and he knew it.

"I'm sorry, ok? I know I've said things that..."

"I don't care if you are sorry! I don't care if you apologize if you can't understand what I am telling you!"

Mike was speechless, taken back by her anger.

"You keep thinking that I enjoy this life, that I like that people are afraid of me! That I have to witness every damn joke, push or mean things that those assholes do, well, guess what, Wheeler. I don't!" an unexpected sob stopped her from talking and she whipped her tears angrily.

Mike moved forward, his first instinct to reach for her, but she took a step back, shaking her head. "No, stay back." She hissed. "I can't have you around when you can't understand that I have spent my entire life forced to be part of something that I don't want, that it makes me sick every day, that is destroying me! You were the only one that was giving me hope but I can't do it when you... when you..."

*Screw this*, Mike thought as he reached for her and wrapped her in his arms. She fought him at first, her tiny fists trying to push him away, to keep him as far as possible, but eventually he won and he let her put her head on his chest and her arms around his waist as sobs were

escaping loudly from her mouth.

They didn't talk, he just held her as tight as she had hold him when he was the one falling apart.

He felt bad, for a lot of different reasons, first, and probably the most important one, the fact that he had been so blind and hadn't been able to see how... broken she was. Broken just like him.

It took her a few minutes to final stop her hiccups and Mike, without even thinking it, placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I understand, El, I do." He whispered gently trying to be as honest as possible and not to upset her again. "And I am truly sorry."

El parted a little, just so they could look in the eyes. "Do you mean it?"

"I do." And he really had no idea how he could still function when her face was just a few inches apart from his and her perfume was driving him nuts.

"Are you going to... am I allowed being your friend in public?"

Something inside was telling him that, that, was a very bad idea, for both. But as he looked into her eyes and saw how... hopeful they were, he felt like he couldn't deny it to her. "Yes, but you have to be careful... I don't care how much Troy messes up with me but you need to stay safe."

Mike almost chuckled when she frowned, those little lines on her forehead appearing again; she was confused and he could tell.

"Why?"

He could have said a million of different things: because he cared about her; because she deserved the whole world if it was for him to decide; because he'd rather have his own ass kicked every day for the rest of his life instead of seeing her hurt, but he just came out with one thing, one little thing that he knew, somehow, would make her understand everything he wanted to tell her.

"Isn't it pretty obvious?"

Mike saw as her breath got caught in her throat and her eyes becoming so wide with incredulity that he almost laughed, if the moment hadn't been so serious.

El opened her mouth, but closed it again, nothing coming out of it. She was in shock.

He didn't say anything, giving her time and knowing that she was probably trying to process things the same way he had done.

Suddenly, though, something in her eyes changed, it was like there was clarity and a certain amount of relief too. Mike wasn't really sure what it was supposed to do or think but when he saw her face getting a just a little bit closer to his, he knew that something big was coming; his heart started to race as he was losing himself in her hazel eyes, too hypnotized and intoxicated by the girl that was still in his arms.

He could see every little detail of her face, even if they were pressed together, he knew deep down that there was no way he could ever have enough of her, having her like that was only making him feel a weird desire, a feeling that was telling him that, his arms, was the place where she was supposed to stay.

He couldn't help but stare her lips: slightly parted, pink and just... perfect. Mike had no idea if it was him the one getting closer, or if it was her or just both, but he could feel her light breath on his chin and could see the way her eyes started to get darker and darker, becoming a completely different shade of brown. Her eyelashes were barely opened, ready to be closed as soon as there would have been no space left between them.

It seemed like the time had stopped as they were moving slowly, oh so slowly, towards each other; he was so overwhelmed by... her to even care about anything else. She was there and she was the only thing that mattered and their lips were so damn close and...

"Hey you two! Is everything ok?"

They jumped apart so quickly that it looked like they had just been shocked by the most powerful energy.

El's blushed hard and turned to face Benny, who was standing by the door looking at them. "We're ok." She managed to say, her voice sounding croaked with a tip of embarrassment.

The man nodded and went back inside, still glancing at the two teens whose faces were almost on fire.

Mike, who had stared the ground founding it incredibly interesting, lifted his eyes, kind of scared of what he might find, his mind already throwing him all the possible '*what ifs*'.

But El... El was smiling, a smile so bright that Mike felt the same thing growing on his lips.

She wasn't mad and she wasn't yelling at him, he took both things as good signs.

"So..." she started after a minute. "We are good?"

"Yeah!" *too excited, man.* "Yeah, we are good!"

"So... friends?"

Mike nodded, trying to understand if they were actually just 'friends'. "Just... could we tell people after winter break? It would give us time to plan everything."

Her face became thoughtful for a second, but then she smiled again, and Mike just wanted to wrap his arms around her again and end what they had started.

"I agree on this, only because there is just one day of school left and we can start the new year together."

"Perfect." He murmured. *Goddamn it, Benny.*

"I think I should go home."

"Yeah, sure." Mike agreed and wanted to laugh when none of them made anything to move from there.

"I think my dad is already home, by now."

"I understand."

But they were still there, still looking at each other. El's hands buried in the pockets of her ripped blue jeans and her arms pressed against the big white sweatshirt that she was wearing.

He knew she didn't want to go away, he didn't want it either.

"Maybe we could hang out tomorrow too? Since it's last day of school?" Mike tried hopeful.

El smiled immediately at the suggestion but after a second she grimaced in disgust. "I wish I could but... Troy is having this Christmas party and I can't miss it, and if my dad finds out that I didn't go, I would end up in a lot of troubles."

"Oh..." he couldn't hide his disappointment.

"But, it will be my last party with them and then... it will be just... us." She told him, trying to cheer him up a little. And it actually worked.

*Us...*

"It sounds good." Mike smiled excited about the fact that it was going to be one last night and then they would both have a new beginning.

"I really have to go." El sighed, sadness in her voice.

Becoming bold all of sudden, Mike stepped ahead and hugged her.

*What the hell?!*

"We are going to see each other at school tomorrow, it's ok." He whispered as her arms took their place back around his body.

"Last day we are apart." She said, and he could feel the relief in her voice.

"Yes, last day."

El parted after a good minute, looking happier than before, and then,

surprising him once again, she stood on the tips of her toes and left a kiss on his cheek.

"Until you tomorrow, Wheeler."

He stood there, like an idiot, watching as she got in the car and drove away. She was seriously something and he knew that tomorrow couldn't get there sooner enough.

When Mike got back inside the diner to grab his backpack, he found Benny at the table waiting for him with a very intimidating look on his face. The poor guy couldn't help but gulp, hoping that the man wouldn't actually kill him.

"I am just going to tell you this once, young man, so you better listen."

Mike nodded, forgetting how to speak, maybe too scared to even open his mouth.

"Jane is a nice girl, who probably had already enough for an entire life, so if you even try to hurt her or do things that you are not supposed to do, you will have to deal with me, understood?" the man was right in front of him, full height and arms crossed.

"Yes, sir." Mike squeaked with a trembling voice. "I won't hurt her, I promise."

Benny threw him another threatening look, before nodding and walking away and Mike started to breathe again.

*That was close.*

It had been weird and scary as hell, but he was glad that El had someone looking out for her, he had never seen her dad, but from what Mike knew he wasn't the best supporter or presence.

Riding back home felt weird, it was like he felt lighter than before but at the same time there were a lot of things that weren't in the right place. He knew that the moment they had shared meant something but it wasn't like it was going to solve all their problems. Plus, his mind was already showing him all the possible things that

could go wrong when they would actually start to tell people that they were friends.

He knew that it was going to be a huge news, maybe a shock for a lot of people, he had to admit it was a shock even for him.

How was he supposed to not worry about everything that was coming? How was he supposed to stay calm and hope that Troy wouldn't hurt him or, worse, El? He was going to make him pay, there was no way he was going to ignore something that big.

And what about her dad? They had never talked a lot about him, it was like she was scared of saying too much, but if she was going to tell him that she decided to drop the group that he had picked for her, Mike knew that there were going to be consequences and he cared about her more than he probably realized at the moment. There were too many things against them, against her, after all, Mike didn't have anything to lose.

The only thing that was helping him, was the fact that at least they would have two entire weeks to figure out what to do and how to drop the bomb. They needed a plan, a solid one, something that could protect both.

For a second, as he kept riding his bike, he thought about talking to Nancy again, she was the only one who knew about her, but at the same time he didn't want to, he wanted to live this... whatever it was, without other people interfering more than they were already doing.

His mind was everywhere, too many thoughts, a lot of questions and no solution or answers to them.

There was one question, though, one question that was driving him insane and worrying him so much... was he going to be enough? How was he going to make her happy?

He was a mess, a little fish drowning in its water. She was going to regret it. She was going to regret him.

That feeling was the worst thing he had ever felt, it was stronger than

joy, hitting harder than anything else, it was the constant feeling of not being able to be enough. He was trying really hard to push it away, to just... live whatever it was happening, but that constant grey cloud would always find a way to come back and steal his happy moments.

And El, well, she was happiness for him; the only thing that was, slowly, showing him that there was light and not only darkness.

As he quickly sneaked into his room, heavy thoughts running wild in his head, Mike knew that he needed reassurance. Some sort of reassurance that would help him to come to peace with El's idea.

*'Are you sure?'* of course he was weak, of course he couldn't be strong enough, but maybe, just maybe, he could learn how to do it, so he could be strong enough for her.

She replied immediately, her message sounding so firm that Mike read it with her voice in his head.

*'Of you? I'm sure.'*

Before he could stop himself, Mike typed: *'Promise?'*

*'Promise.'* And somehow, he believed her.

## 10. Chapter 9

Chapter 9

"Can you feel it?! Can YOU feel it?!"

"Dustin scream one more time and I swear to god I am going to kick your ass!"

"No! No! I am not going to stop it, Max! It's freedom! You need to feel it!"

Lucas snorted, annoyed by the extreme enthusiasm of his friend. "Dustin, we know it's last day of school, but can you please calm down? Everybody is looking at us."

"No I won't! You guys need to stop being pains in the ass and be happy! It's our last day!"

"If you repeat it one more time, I swear, Dustin, I will kill you before Christmas!" Max told him, looking ready to actually choke him with her hands.

Mike, on the other side, was trying his best not to laugh, limiting himself to just smirk at the three people. The only one keeping him company was the poor Will, of course, who, instead of join the discussion was reading a book while drinking some water. They were all sat at their usual table, eating lunch and well... yelling at each other.

It was nice, Mike had to admit it, the group was so loud, so happy and so annoying all at the same time that he had no time or way to focus on something else.

"Oh wait a second!" Dustin yelled jumping in front of Mike, scaring him to death. "We forgot to tell you that we are having a party tonight!"

"A what?"

"A party! At Will's!"

"Oh" Mike started, as the only thought of a party was giving him a free tour to 'anxiety city'. "I don't do parties, guys, it's not my thing, sorry."

"What Dustin was trying to say" Will intervened putting down the book. "It's that we are going to meet at my house, eat pizza and watch a movie to celebrate..."

"To celebrate our freedom!" Dustin yelled interrupting Will.

"O my God! Stop it!"

"It's really nothing." Will said while Max and Dustin kept yelling at each other. "It's just an excuse to spend some time together."

"And it's going to be just the four of us, five if you come." Lucas told him, looking hopeful.

"Uhm..." of course it was something different, but it sounded way more interesting than staying at home all night hiding from his parents and pretending to be happy about the holidays. "Ok, sure, I'll come."

"Yes!" Dustin exclaimed excited. "It's going to be AMAZING!"

"Dustin, holy shit, calm down!"

"Do you want me to pick you up?" Lucas asked Mike. "It's not ideal to ride a bike where Will lives, roads are pretty messy and very dark at night."

"Oh, no, I can actually drive." Mike shrugged. "I got my license last year."

His freaking dad had wanted to take him on the street, so he could 'understand how dangerous the world could be' but after learning how to drive and getting that little piece of plastic, he had never used the car, or the license, again. There was no point of going around one of the smallest town on earth with a car when he could easily move with his bike and enjoy the freedom of going wherever he wanted.

"That's great! Then I'll text you my address and you can meet us

there!" Will was so happy that Mike couldn't help but smile at the usual quiet guy sat by his side. "They are going to go there around 6, but you can come whenever you want."

Before anyone had the chance to say something else, Dustin started to talk about all the good things they were going to do, eat and see at the so called 'party'. All the movies were already chosen by him, of course, and nobody, except maybe Max, tried to argue with him. They were good movies, though, and they were going to enjoy the night no matter what.

Mike zoomed out for a second, looking around the cafeteria and feeling slightly disappointed when, again, he couldn't find El sitting there. She had left him her usual note that morning, it was a simple *Last day! :)* but it had made him smile.

"You can also sleep at my house, if you want, the others are already staying, it's not a problem." He heard Will and quickly recovered from the flashback.

"Oh, uhm, I don't know, I... sort of never had a sleepover."

"WHAT?!" Dustin screamed again his voice piercing and loud. "Ok, that's not something good, we have to fix this! You are going to stay at Will's tonight and that's it."

"My god, Dustin shut the hell up! Leave him alone!" Max told him hitting his arm.

"Why are they always fighting?" Mike asked looking at Lucas and Will.

"Well," Lucas answered immediately, a mischievous grin on his face. "They have some kind of... tension that they haven't solved... yet."

"Oh my god, Lucas!" Max yelled again.

"What kind of tension?" Mike ignored the girl and kept talking.

"You know, a tension that it can be solved only if... you are alone, in a room."

"Lucas, stop it!"

"So they like each other?" the three boys kept ignoring Max and Dustin.

"We really don't know! It's a thing that has been going on since middle school." Will smiled.

Mike nodded, keeping himself from laughing as their poor victims were slowly becoming redder and redder. "Now everything makes sense!"

"I know, right! Maybe by the time we turn eighty they will actually have a talk." Lucas joked.

The sound of the bell saved Max and Dustin from the rest of the conversation and they quickly run away without even looking at each other or at the rest of the boys.

"That was fun." Lucas commented while packing his things.

"I agree." Mike smirked.

"So, are we going to see you tonight?" Will asked as they walked out of the cafeteria and started heading to their classes.

"I guess, yes, it sounds fun."

"Awesome!" both Lucas and Will exclaimed.

Mike quickly wrote his new number on a piece of paper and handed it to Will, who promised to send him the address as soon as possible.

The rest of his day passed smoothly, both students and teachers were already in 'vacation mood' so none of them had any intentions of doing something productive.

Nobody was paying attention and Mike was beyond gone into his own world to even worry about anything else.

It was only thirty minutes before school day was done that something caught his attention though, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"From what I've heard, it's going to be huge!" a girl sat behind him whispered.

"Oh yes! Usually the Harrington are the best at throwing parties!" said another one giggling excited.

"And Troy is going to buy tons of alcohol! We are going to be wasted!"

"You know who else is going to be there? That Brenner girl!"

"What?!" some other girl exclaimed.

"God, she really needs to stop going around him like puppy, it's ridiculous."

"No, what she needs to do is to stop being his whore!"

Mike could feel the bile rising up in his throat and without even noticing, he curled his hand into a fist.

"I bet Troy is just too good and she just can't stop, I would get it!"

"I think it's really sad what she is doing she is such a slu..."

"Would you please stop it?" Mike turned suddenly, anger in his voice.  
"It's really annoying, so please shut up."

The three girls looked at him like he was crazy, well, of course he wasn't even supposed to talk to them, but to tell them to shut up like that? He definitely had a death wish. But there was no way he could let them talk about El like that. No way.

Mike turned his back before they could tell him anything, and inside he hoped they would seriously stop.

They did stop talking about El, but started to talk about him. Thank god he didn't care about their crap.

Thirty-five minutes later, Mike was on his bike ready to ride home and forget about school for two entire weeks. Although he knew it was going to be the most insane winter break ever.

The house was quiet and he noticed that both his parents' cars were gone; Nancy was probably at one of her friends' house and Holly must have been with his mom.

Relief run through his body as he could enjoy some peace. Mike dropped his backpack in a corner, drank some orange juice and then walked upstairs.

First thing he did as he got into his room was taking the phone out of the drawer and immediately checking it, there were two messages: one from Will and one from El.

He opened El's first. *'Happy Winter break! Can I see you tomorrow?'*

*'Happy Winter break to you too! Of course we can see each other tomorrow!'*

Will's message was his address and a smiling emoji. He typed a thank you and then took some clothes as he went for a shower.

The hot water on his skin helped Mike to calm down a little as the idea of going to spend time with the group was slowly becoming more real, he wasn't panicking, he was just a little nervous.

He knew somehow he was always going to be stuck, there were too many things that had happened, but this was his chance to start taking back some of his life.

Back in his room, finally dry and dressed, he immediately checked for a message on his phone, but there was nothing new. El had been very quiet that day, which was very unusual, but she probably had stuff to do. Also, it was the first time he had ever heard someone talking about her and making awful comments, she usually was untouchable; for a second he wondered if her plan had already started, maybe she had talked to someone or did something that changed the way people used to see her. The only way he was going to find it out, was seeing her the next day and ask her himself.

Mike quickly glanced at the time, he hoped that, at least, one of his parents would show up in time so he could tell them where he was going and most important, use the car.

Despite the fact that he disliked both his parents, he realized that he maybe he was supposed to tell them where he was going. They were going to be surprised by the fact that he was actually going to a friend's house, well, they were going to be amazed only by the fact that he had real friends. While waiting, he packed a pajama and some new clothes, he wasn't sure if he was going to stay overnight, but it wouldn't hurt to have something to use just in case. As he quickly checked if he had everything, his eyes fell on the little thing still on the bed. Deciding that there was no imminent risk, Mike took the phone and stuffed it in the front pocket of his backpack.

Ten minutes later, almost not believing his own luck, he saw his mom getting out of the car with Holly and two plastic bags from the grocery store. Mike run downstairs with his bag and waited for them in the kitchen. He knew his mom was going to say yes, it wasn't like she really cared, but he was a little worried that maybe she wouldn't agree.

"Mike, what are you doing here?"

He turned and saw his mom standing just a few feet from him. "Oh, hey, I... uhm... Wanted to ask you if I could borrow the car?"

She frowned. "The car? Why? Where do you have to go?"

"Well, I was invited to a party..." and he immediately clarified when her expression changed. "Not an actual party! It's more a movie night with some friends, I might sleep there too."

"What friends? Who are they?"

*Please make her stop.* "It's just a group from school, we are like... hanging out sometimes."

Mike saw that her mom was about to ask more things but was interrupted by his little sister who came into the kitchen asking for a snack.

"Give me a second, Holls, I am talking to Mike."

"But I am hungry now." The girl complained pouting.

The woman sighed, giving up. "Ok, take the car Mike, but let me know what time you are coming back tomorrow."

"Sure, thank you, bye!" he exclaimed picking up the keys and running out of the house.

"Bye!" his mom yelled from the kitchen.

Getting into the car was easy, driving it, well that was something he needed to work on.

*Thank god for the automatic transmission!* Mike thought as he placed his foot on the break and started the engine. It took a few minutes to be sure of what he was doing, but with some fake confidence he started to drive. The address that Will had sent him wasn't really familiar, but he was sure he would find a way to arrive.

Twenty-five minutes later and three wrong roads, Mike finally managed to pull into, what it looked like, the right street. It was a long and unpaved street with trees on the side with long and falling branches.

Mike slowed down and drove until he saw a little house at the end of the road and parked in front of it, there was Lucas' familiar car. Sighing in relief, Mike parked his own car and turned off the engine.

*Everything is going to be fine*, he thought as he opened the door, he could feel the excitement growing as a little smile appeared on his lips.

"Wheeler!" Mike turned his head to see where the scream came from and saw Dustin right by the window waving and smiling. "Will! Can you open the door?! Mike is here!"

He heard footsteps and by the time he reached the door, it was already opened and Will was there. "Hey, so glad you could make it!"

"Yeah, thank you for inviting me!"

"No problem, come on in, we are playing this new board game that Lucas bought and eating chips."

As he walked in, he looked around: it was a very nice house, maybe not too big but he didn't care. There were a lot of pictures of Will and of another kid and a lady that Mike thought was Will's mom.

"My mom loves putting pictures everywhere," Will explained scratching the back of his neck. "It's quiet embarrassing, but yeah. Oh and the other boy is my brother, Jonathan, he is in college now."

"Oh, cool, I didn't know you had a brother."

"Mike!" Lucas yelled from the kitchen. "Come here! You have to try this new game, it's awesome!"

There was no time to be embarrassed or feel like he didn't belong there, Max, Lucas Will and Dustin were just great and Mike was so wrapped into whatever they had planned to even focus on anything else.

It was all laughs and yells and jokes that it seemed more like a dream rather than real life. At one point, during the game, they ordered three pizzas and played until the doorbell rang.

"This pizza is delicious!" Max said while eating a slice with pepperoni and sausage on it.

"I agree, it's like heaven!" Lucas muttered while chewing.

"Should we finish the game or watch a movie after?" Dustin asked taking another slice.

"We could do both, it's just eight, we have time." Will answered.

Silence fell again as everybody was too busy eating to worry about any other activity.

"Where's your mom?" Lucas turned to stare at Will.

"She's out, she wanted to give us some privacy."

"Will's mom is an angel." Dustin commented. "She is the sweetest thing on earth."

"Absolutely!" Lucas nodded enthusiastically. "You have to meet her, Mike!"

"Sure." Mike smiled.

"You are sleeping here, right?" Will intervened.

"If it's not a problem, yes."

"Of course not!" Dustin screamed startling everyone. "You have to stay!"

"You are such a pain!" Max said with an annoyed snort.

It was so easy to be part of that group, they were all so close to each other but at the same time so open to welcome whoever wanted to stay there.

Mike felt like it was worth it to get out of his safe bubble, they deserved it and he would be grateful forever for what those guys were doing for him.

A little bit past nine, after they had finished the game, and Mike had won surprising everyone, they made pop corns and moved into the living room ready to watch a movie.

"So, Ghostbusters is ok with everyone?" Max asked before putting the DVD.

"Yep!" the whole group agreed taking seats.

"You guys ready for the best movie ever?!" Dustin exclaimed excitedly.

"Dustin, man, calm down, we know it's the best movie ever." Will told him with a kind smile.

"Everybody shut up! The movie is starting!" and then Max sat on the couch stealing the bowl of pop corns from Dustin's lap.

It took a couple of minute but finally everybody stopped talking as the movie started.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"What the heck is that?!" Lucas asked annoyed.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"Is that a phone?" Dustin said getting up.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"Whose phone is that?!" Max stopped the movie and started to look around.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"It's not mine." Will told the guys while checking it.

"Mine either." Lucas took his out of his pocket.

"Not even mine." Dustin said with a shrug.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"Mike?" Everybody turned to look at him, as he was the only one still sat on the couch.

"What? It can't be mine."

*Buzz buzz buzz*

They all went quiet, listening from where the noise was coming from.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"It's definitely a phone." Max insisted.

"I think it comes from that chair." Said Will while walking away from

the living room.

"Isn't it your backpack, Mike?" Lucas inquired as he followed his friend.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

Mike stood up and walked where the guys were. "It is mine." He whispered confused.

"Whoever is calling is not giving up." The girl stated looking at the backpack like it was a bomb.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"You going to answer?" Will tried.

Mike nodded, more confused than before and opened the zip where the phone was.

*El*

"Who is 'El'?" Dustin asked spying Mike's phone.

But Mike didn't answer, why was El calling him? Why so late?  
"Where's the bathroom?"

"First door on your left." Will immediately answered.

Mike run and shut the door as he accepted the call.

"El?" there was some kind of fear in his voice.

"Miiiiickeyyyyyy!" Her voice was so loud that Mike had to pull away the phone from his ear.

"El? Are you ok?"

"Oh Mickey!" and he heard her laugh, a muffled and unhappy laugh.  
"Everything is spinniiiing!"

Was she drunk? "El? Have you been drinking?"

"Maybe!" the girl laughed. "But don't tell Mike! He is going to be maaaad!"

*What the...* "El, where are you?" he was getting worried, she was drunk and sounded very weird.

"I don't know..." she murmured. "I was there and now here!"

"Is there someone who can help you?"

"Miiickey! You so silly!"

"El, where are you?"

"Whaaaat?"

"El, please, I need to understand where are you, are you ok? Are you safe?"

A weird and very sad laugh came out from the speaker and Mike, without even thinking, was already out of the bathroom grabbing his car keys.

"If you tell where you are I'm coming to pick you up, but you have to tell me where you are, ok? Please, focus."

"I'm... I was where Troy was..." her voice muffled by a yawn.

"I'm coming, ok? Stay awake, El, please."

"Hurry." She whispered and hung up.

"Where's Troy's house?" Mike asked to the guys who were watching him with confused looks. "Guys, where's Troy's house?!"

"Uh... It's right by Loch Nora neighborhood, do you know it?"

"Yes, yes! I have to go guys, I'm sorry!"

He quickly run into the car and turned it on, reversing and leaving as fast as he could; his foot pressing hard on the pedal as he drove through Hawkins.

He couldn't push away the feeling that something really bad was going on, the way El had sounded, the way she had laughed without her usual happiness, the way she seemed so close to just crumble down. His heart was racing, he just needed to find her and make sure she was fine, everything else could wait.

As he got closer to the neighborhood, he slowed down; from what he had understood, El had walked away from the house, as drunk as she was she might have ended up in the middle of the road without even realizing it.

"Come on, come on." Mike repeated checking every corner and side of the road. He had never been so scared in his entire life. Just the idea of El being alone, no able to understand what was going on, he couldn't, he just couldn't.

His hands were shaking but he wasn't paying attention to it, he just needed her.

Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed a shadow on the right side of the road, it didn't look like an animal but he was too far away to be sure.

He sped up a little, *please, tell me it's her, please.*

Mike got a close as possible and thanked whatever god existed when he recognized her curly hair.

He braked so hard that the car bounced back and forth. "El!" he sighed getting out and running towards her. "EL!" he called.

El turned slowly, like she wasn't sure who was calling her or what was happening and that was when Mike noticed the look on her face: empty and broken.

"Mike..." she whispered.

"My god..." his heart broke in so many pieces.

Her make-up was all over her face, her hair was messy and her short t-shirt and short skirt were too light to be outside in the cold.

His arms reached for her and she let him wrap her in his embrace.

"It's ok, I got you now." Mike murmured. "It's over, you are ok."

Her arms, which were bare, were ice to his touch; he wondered for how long she had been outside before calling him.

"Let's go inside, it's hot and it will help you to get warmer." Mike leaded her to the car, she could barely stand. "I also have some water, you need to drink."

But El didn't answer or nodded, Mike had to sit her down and make sure she wouldn't fell down.

What had happened? Why was she like that?

When he got inside the car he turned the heater higher and grabbed a blanked and the bottle from the back seats. "Here, get a little sip, ok?" She didn't move. "El, you need to drink, please have a sip." He sounded desperate. "Get a sip and I'm going to take you home, so you can rest, ok?"

That seemed to get a reaction as El quickly turned to look at him, fear in her eyes.

"No, no, no, I can't go there, don't take me there!"

"What?"

"I can't, don't take me back, please, Mike."

"You don't want to go home?"

"No, no, don't take me there." She panicked and her hand reached for Mike's.

He really had no idea what was going on, she was like she was about to cry and pass out at the same time. "I..." he started but he had no idea how to continue it.

"Mike, please." She begged.

Her eyes were gazed by something that he wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or the sadness she was feeling.

"Ok," he agreed "But I need to know what happened, El, it doesn't have to be right now, but you need to tell me."

El nodded as gratitude appeared on her face for a brief moment.

"We are going to my house, we can stay in the basement, nobody will find you."

Before starting to drive again he made sure she was buckled up and that the blanket was on her.

Making sure nobody was coming he made a u-turn and drove away. He hadn't been able to see Troy's house and that scared him, how far was it? How long did she walk? Why did she run away?

He took a look at her, her head was on the window, her eyes closed and her mouth slightly open and she her breathing was becoming slower.

Mike tried to drive gently, avoiding bumps and not speeding, he didn't want to wake her up or freak her out. His mind was everywhere but just the fact that she was finally by his side, safe and sound, it helped him a little bit.

Unfortunately, his house was only a few minutes apart, so they arrived pretty quickly. He knew both his parents were already sleeping, he could park the car on the driveway and tell them that he came back earlier.

He could sneak El out from the door in the basement and let her stay there for the night.

"El, we are here." Mike whispered gently, but she didn't move. "El, you have to wake up for a couple of minutes."

*Crap.*

He got out and walked to her side, opening the door, hoping the cold air would wake her up a little, but of course his plan failed.

There was no way he could carry her all the way down, not because she was heavy, but because he was too weak.

Giving up, Mike put his hand on her cheek and stroked it softly. "El, you have to wake." As he kept stroking, he saw her eyelashes opening a little. "El, wake up, please."

"Mike?" she croaked unsure.

"Yes, yes it's me!" *Thank god!* "Can you walk?"

"I think so..."

"Ok, there's not a lot to walk and then you can rest, I promise."

"Promise." She repeated, a small smile on her lips.

Slowly, Mike helped El to get out of the car and quickly picked her up as she stumbled almost falling. She held on to him as they made their way on the back of the house, his arm, around her waist, holding her up and helping her to walk.

"I feel dizzy." She said weakly.

"I know, but we are almost there, just few more steps."

When they finally made it to door, Mike opened it and pulled El inside, laying her on the couch as fast as he could. "Here, we are here."

She grumbled something senseless as she was finally down. Mike started to look for blankets, gathering as much as he could all around the room. He also looked for a bucket, just in case.

He took her shoes off and laid the covers on her body. She looked like she had fallen asleep again, so Mike put the last blanket on and started to walk away, but something grabbed his wrist; it was El, whose eyes were barely opened.

"Stay here." She whispered.

"What?"

"Lay here, please."

He knew he shouldn't do it, he knew she was tired, drunk and needed to rest, but the look in her eyes was pleading him and he just couldn't say no.

"Ok," he nodded taking his shoes off.

El moved a little so there was some space for him. He got under the blankets and he laid down so they were facing each other. She reached for his hands and wrapped them with hers.

"Thank you." She breathed before falling asleep.

And even if Mike wasn't really sure for what she was thanking him for, as he felt himself ready to sleep too, he was just glad that she was safe, maybe she wasn't ok, but at least he was there to take care of her.

## 11. Chapter 10

### Chapter 10

There was a noise, it sounded like someone was crying and whimpering at the same time, there was no way he could really understand what was going on, though, his brain was lost in a fog that didn't let him fully figure out the situation.

Something on the back of his head was telling him to wake the hell up, to go check and find what that noise was, but there also was that sweet darkness that was calling him back, asking him to stay there and just keep sleeping.

He was almost ready to listen to that little voice when a crack of light hit his eyes making him squeeze them really tight. Mike groaned almost annoyed, forcing himself to open his eyes and try to finally figure out what the hell was going on.

Confusion came into him when he realized that he wasn't in his room, on his bed, but he was lying on the couch in the basement, covered by thousands of blankets.

It took him a few seconds to wipe away his sleepiness and let the memories of the night coming back to his mind.

*El!* He thought and stood up immediately, running to the bathroom. The girl was almost laying down on the floor, although her up body was bended over the toilet.

*Crap.*

Mike walked towards El, trying not to scare her; he gently laid his hand on her shoulder and sat down by her side.

"Go away." she muffled weakly looking at him. She was pale and there was a layer of sweat on her forehead.

"No way I'm leaving you."

She was about to protest when another wave of nausea hit her

making her turn again to the toilet. Mike immediately pulled her hair back and waited while the poor girl emptied her stomach one more time.

It took a good couple of minutes, but El finally managed to calm down, flushing and getting away from the toilet, without even thinking, probably, she reached for him, putting her head on his chest and breathing deeply.

"Feeling better?" Mike asked tentatively, hugging her while gently caressing her back.

El snorted, and he understood that she was definitely still feeling like crap. "I really need to brush my teeth." She whispered, her face still pressed on him.

"I think I might have an extra toothbrush somewhere in the cabinet."

Mike felt her sigh, it was a mix between relief and tiredness and he knew she must have been exhausted.

"You are lucky the door of the bathroom was open and I found it, I almost threw up on you." El informed, chuckling a little, like she wanted to ease the tension.

"Lucky me, then." He tried to joke, but didn't quite work. "Do you think you can stand up? You need to rest and I'll go find something to eat and drink for you."

"But I'm comfy here." She sounded like a little girl.

"No discussions, you need to lay down." He regretfully pulled her away and stood up, giving her his hand which she grabbed after a few seconds, holding onto it like she was to drift away if she didn't.

"Let me get the toothbrush." Mike said moving away, but El didn't let him go.

"I feel too dizzy." She murmured becoming even paler than before.

"Oh, ok, can you hold yourself on the sink for a second?"

"I think so..."

Mike carefully helped her to reach it, placing her hands on the cold white pottery. "Hold on, ok? Don't let go." He quickly turned his back and opened the small cabinet, messing it until he found what he was looking for.

"I look disgusting." He heard El whisper. "My god, I should hide."

"Shut up," he told her while getting back behind her and handing the toothbrush. "You are pretty."

"Pretty?" she repeated looking somehow doubtful.

"Yeah, pretty, really pretty."

*Wheeler, seriously?!*

But instead of arguing, El smiled a little and her cheeks became a little bit more colored.

He waited for her to brush her teeth and when she was done, his arm found his way around her waist and helped her to move from the bathroom back to the couch.

"You need food and liquids, so wait here and I am going to find something for you." He kind of commanded as she was finally secure on the couch.

"Yes sir." El joked again, a playful smile on her lips.

Making sure, one last time, that she wasn't going to fall and was warm enough, he climbed the stairs and rushed into the kitchen. He got some bread and cookies and put the kettle on the stove to make some tea.

He had never got drunk in his entire life, but he couldn't say the same for his sister, who on the contrary, used to drink pretty much every weekend while she was in high school. Their parents had never found out, too oblivious and wrapped in their own world, but Mike had always been a silent observer and his room was right in front of his sister's, he had heard her stumbling and falling thousands of times,

until one night he had decided to help her. At the age of fourteen, Mike Wheeler had become a 'hangover expert' as Nancy used to call him.

Once the water was ready, he placed everything on a tray and went back downstairs.

"You still awake?" he asked gently getting close to El.

"Yes, the room starts to spin as soon as I close my eyes."

"It'll pass soon, you already have less alcohol in your body now." He said sitting next to her and passing the tray. "There are cookies and bread, it should help your stomach and I made some green tea, it should help your hangover, I'll give you some aspirin after you ate."

El turned and gave him an amused, yet confused look. "How do you know so much about hangovers?"

"My sister, I was the one taking care of her." He quickly explained.

They both fell silent as El started to poke her food and taking little sips of her beverage.

"How are you feeling?" he asked quietly after a few minutes.

She smiled, a very fake smile if Mike could say. "I'm ok."

He didn't want to be pushy, giving her time, but he was worried and couldn't just pretend that nothing happened. "You can trust me, you know that, right?"

El nodded, avoiding his gaze and deciding that breaking the poor cookie was better than talking to him.

There was silence again, a weird silence that full of questions and that for some reasons weighted on them like the worst mountain.

"You can go sleep in your room if you want." She murmured while nursing slowly her tea.

"Uhm... I actually can't..." Mike started and knew he had to explain

when he saw her confused face again. "I shouldn't be here? I was supposed to stay at Will's so..."

"Wait, you were busy?" El asked, her eyes wide.

"Yeah, uhm, sort of, I was invited to spend the night with the group, you know? The one I have lunch with?"

"Oh god." She whispered and her voice cracked. "I'm so stupid, I'm so sorry Mike I really shouldn't have called, I..."

"No, no," Mike interrupted and felt his heart breaking when he noticed that tears had started to show in her eyes. "You needed me, it's ok, you don't need to apologize."

"No, I should have dealt with it on my own, I'm so sorry, please, forgive I didn't mean to..." and with that she broke into sobs. Hiccupping and crying so hard that Mike thought she was going to pass out.

He immediately took the tray away from her, putting it on the floor, and went to wrap his arms around her shaking figure, wondering what the hell was going on to the girl that had always been so strong.

"It's ok, it's ok." Mike kept whispering, cradling her and keeping her close.

"Mike, I'm sorry." She told him parting a little. "I'm so sorry."

"It's ok, please stop apologizing."

"No..." El sobbed. "I have to."

"El, I can have plenty of sleepovers, ok? It's ok, really."

"No, Mike you don't understand." She managed to say before crying even harder.

And that made Mike wonder what she was talking about, something was telling him that there was something else going on. So he decided to let her calm down and then ask questions, he wouldn't let her go without knowing what had happened to her.

Slowly, her crying quite down, leaving her a little shaky and probably emotional drained, but he wasn't going to give up.

"I know you don't want to talk, that you must be tired and just want to sleep, but you need to talk to me, you need to tell me what's going on, because honestly this is freaking me out."

"Mike, it's nothing..."

"No." and he was getting a little bit angry, mostly due to the fact that he was scared for her. "You call me drunk, while in the middle of the road in freaking December. You sounded like... something had happened and then you tell me you don't want to go home and you just... cry and fall apart. Something is wrong, El, you can trust me and I can help you."

She didn't speak but he didn't give up. "Did you do something... illegal?"

"What? No!"

"Did you... did someone said something to you?"

She didn't answer and that made his heart race faster. "Did... did someone... hurt you?" he felt like he was going to throw up.

El sighed, deeply, parting from him and sitting a little bit farther; he waited patiently observing how she was nervously playing with her hands. "What I am going to tell you needs to stay only between you and I, ok?" her voice came out broken and lower than usual, but Mike forced himself to nod, staying in silence and respecting her times. A bubble of anxiety started to grow, and he wasn't really sure if he wanted to know at that point.

"I lied to you" she started, looking at the floor and sounding more hurt than ever. "When I told you my story, I lied. My mom didn't die, she is still alive."

Mike frowned slightly confused, but guessed that there was definitely more of the story, so he let her talk.

"I was three at the time and I was living with her. One day, though,

someone from social services came to get me and put me in a foster house because, in their opinion, my mom wasn't able to take of me anymore." El stopped like she was trying to gather energies to keep going. "I didn't really know what was going on, you know? One day I was home, the next I was somewhere else. It wasn't until I was adopted that I found out that she is still alive but... it's more like she isn't. They are not sure what happened to her but, to make it short, it seems like part of her brain just stopped working and now she is... she is not even able to speak."

Mike grabbed her hands, hoping she would stop torturing them and that gesture would give her some kind of comfort.

"The thing is, she is still alive because there are machines and doctors with her 24/7 making sure she is still fine and those people and machines are paid... are paid by him." El said the last part with so much pain and anger that honestly scared Mike.

"We have a pact, you know? I have to follow everything he says and do everything he wants and he'll keep her alive. If I don't do it, he will stop everything."

He couldn't believe it, was there someone who would actually do something like that?

"I know what you are thinking, and you are right, what human being could actually do something so mean? He can. I didn't believe him at the beginning, but he made sure I would when he literally ordered the doctors to end everything right in front of me. I was ten." She quickly wiped away a tear. "I have no idea where my mom was before I was adopted, but the first thing he did when I got here, was to make sure that I knew that he had her." She shook her head as she couldn't believe it either.

"What happened tonight was because of this... I tried to talk to him about you and... leaving the group..."

"El..." Mike couldn't help it.

"No, it was a promise, it *is* a promise and I had to try."

"What happened then?"

Her look was so empty. "He started to yell, to tell me how ungrateful I was, that he was the one who saved me and that... I had to choose... I had to choose between you and my mom."

At that point Mike was speechless and felt like someone had thrown a punch into his stomach.

"I..." El started to sob again. "I chose... I chose her."

"Oh El." Mike spoke softly, hugging her again. "You made the right choice, your mom is way more important than me."

"The thing is, Mike, I... can't do this, I can't spend my life being... trapped by him, afraid that he might hurt her every time I do something he doesn't want me to do."

"So that's why you got drunk?"

El sighed for the hundredth time, like she needed to recharge herself before talking. "After the fight, we still needed to go to the damn party, so I wore what he wanted, did everything he wanted, he was already upset and I didn't want to cause another scene. But the thing is... Troy, well he knows..."

"Knows what?" Mike asked trying to understand.

"He is supposed to... keep an eye on me and report to... him, if I do things that I'm not supposed to do. So... he talked to him, he told him... Well, I'm not sure what he actually told him, they talked while I wasn't there."

"You mean that... Troy knows about your mom? And that your father is threatening you and he is not doing anything with it?"

She let herself laugh, an empty and fake laugh that made Mike's blood freeze in his veins. "Mike, Troy is helping my father, he tells him everything that I do, wherever I go or whoever I see. He loves to this and..." she paused, not sure if she could actually continue. "And if I disobey, he makes sure that I remember who I belong to. So, I fought with Troy too and... I was so mad and upset and I just started

to drink whatever kind of alcohol there was around."

"Did... did Troy hurt you?"

"No, Mike." She answered sweetly, as to reassure him. "He knows he is not supposed to do it."

"But he did it? Before?"

"I..." El breathed deeply. "It happened only once, he slapped me but Brenner found out and they have an agreement."

His head was spinning as everything she had told him was slowly sinking in. He couldn't stay sit so he stood up, starting to pace around the basement, while El was watching him with wide eyes.

There were too many things, he wasn't even sure if he could process all of them. There was a weird feeling, a powerful anger that was rising and he felt like he wanted to smash things, or better, destroy those son of a bitch. How could they do this? Where was their conscience? But the question that was ringing in his head since the beginning was: why El? Why did she have to go through this? She didn't deserve any of that crap. Hadn't she had already enough?

Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why she had never talked to anyone about this? Why she didn't look for help? What was all of that about?

"Does anyone else know?" he asked abruptly, giving voice to his thoughts.

"No, I... I have been too afraid to tell this to people, I shouldn't have told you either, but... I can't do this anymore."

He kept pacing, back and forth, having no idea what to do, what to say, how to react.

"I didn't mention your name, if that's what you are worried about." El informed weakly, staring at the floor.

That made him stop. "What?" he wondered, his voice full of

incredulity.

"I didn't say your name, to him, I just told him that I had a friend and..."

"You are kidding me right?" he cut her almost mad. "Do you really think I would care about it? It didn't even cross my mind!"

They stared at each other, Mike wanting to kick something and El almost ready to cry again.

"I thought..." she whispered but didn't finish her sentence.

"I don't know what you thought, El, but if you think that... *that* is the only thing that went through my mind, then you really don't know me."

"Mike, I..." she tried to stand up, as she wanted to reach for him, like she wanted to comfort him. Because, that's who she was, always ready to be there for him even if she was the one falling apart.

"You have to sit down, El." He rushed by her side, gently pushing her back on the couch.

"I'm sorry." She said again.

"I need you to stop telling me that, you don't have to be sorry, you didn't do anything wrong, this is not your fault."

"I dragged you into this, of course it's my fault."

"I dragged you into my shit too, El, so what? What did you want to do? Not telling me anything?"

"You... this is not your battle to fight, you should just forget everything that I told you and move on and..."

"Stop." Mike almost screamed. "Just stop, ok? You can't tell me this. How do you expect me to... forget this? Forget what they are doing to you? What you are going through?"

"This is not your problem to solve, you can't help me." El stated almost getting mad herself.

"And so what?"

"So you should just ignore this."

"I'm not going to. I'm not going to ignore you or anything related to you."

"This is not a game, Mike, you have your life and..."

"What life?! What are you talking about? My life started the moment you stopped me at school that afternoon! Goddamn it El!"

He walked away, taking a deep breath, and trying to calm down.

*Isn't it funny how we always fight about who cares more about the other?*  
It was funny in a certain way and it was that thought that made him cool off, able to turn back and going to sit down next to her again.

They stared at each other, without talking, both with a lot of thoughts in their heads. There were tons of things he wanted to tell her, some of them were angry things, some of them were just... words, hoping they could help her feeling better, but knowing already how useless they were going to sound.

She made the first move, placing her soft and small hand on his, squeezing it and sighing in relief when he squeezed it back.

"How do we always end up fighting?" El smirked sadly, reading his mind.

"Well... it's easy if you think about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Because..." *Say it, just say it.* "Because we care about each other."

Mike turned to face her, their gaze meeting, their eyes connected and... something vibrated, something started to slowly take its place. There was something in her eyes, some sort of clarity and... relief?

Somehow, though, in his mind he couldn't help thinking that it was the worst moment ever, she was hurt, tired and there was no way this

could end up like he wanted. He should stop everything, but what was everything?

He should find a way to stop himself from getting embarrassed, this was not what he had planned... he really hadn't planned anything at all but... she was there and they were both moving towards each other, slowly as it looked more like a dream rather than reality.

And then, Mike saw El's lips parting a little and his heart started to speed.

Her brown eyes were sparkling again, he could see them so clearly, so close, and damn, if they were stunning. She was there and she was beautiful. Mike felt like he was drowning in the deepest ocean, losing his breath as he was falling slowly deeper and deeper in the water and El, well, she was the only one who could show him how to breathe again.

So, he did it, he closed that small space between them, their lips touching gently, and everything disappeared. There were only two things in the whole room: her and her perfume reassuring him that she was real and perfect.

El got closer, pressing onto him, her hands moving to his hair as his went to cup her cheeks.

They didn't move for what it seemed to be years. Pressed against each other; lips against lips and body against body. There was no rush, there were no expectations, just the two of them, there, alone and against the whole world.

It wasn't a kiss like you see in the movies; no, it was a kiss that was more innocent than anything else, it was sweet and completed unplanned and unexpected. It was the best thing that had ever happened in his life.

He had no idea who parted first, when they parted or after how long they did it; the only thing he knew was that at one point he saw El's eyes open again and the tiniest but happiest smile on her face that made his heart pound faster and faster.

He wasn't ready to pull away yet and it look like she wasn't ready either as she moved to press her forehead against his.

"If this is a dream I never want to wake up." El spoke so quietly after hours.

Were they hours? Or just mere seconds?

He was supposed to tell her something, wasn't he? But his brain was somewhere else, his entire mind was somewhere else; he couldn't really understand how *that* had just happened, how she was seriously there and *she* was the one worried about it being a dream.

Without even realizing it a chuckle left his mouth and Mike thought that if he was going to die in that moment, well, he would definitely die as the happiest man on earth.

"What's so funny?" El breathed and he could see the same little smile on her lips, the one that she had done before and that he had never seen.

There were tons of things he could have said, maybe smart things, or less cheesy things, but as he had no filters on, the only answer that came out of his mouth was something that not even he was prepared for. "There's no way you could be more perfect than this."

El stopped breathing for a second at his words and then she blushed, her cheeks turning into a soft shade of red that made her look even cuter. "Who knew you would be such a mushy person."

"Oh so now I am the soft one?" he teased as El moved a little, just enough to be able to look at him in the eyes.

She laughed, her usual laugh, her happy one, the one he grew so fond of. "Maybe, but I like it."

And besides the fact that he was on cloud nine and that El wasn't freaking out like he thought she would do and she looked actually happy; Mike started to feel that usual wave on insecurity as thousands of doubts started to crawl back, taking the place of that amazing feeling of happiness he had felt only instants ago.

He let his arms fell down and moved away from her, not sure if what he was doing was right with her, if maybe was too much.

"Mike?" her voice unsure, as he avoided her gaze.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done it, I definitely overstepped and you weren't feeling ok..."

"Stop it." She told him and moved to be close to him again. "Just stop that damn mind of yours, ok? I... it was... I wanted it too, Mike."

*She did?!*

"You did?!" he asked, wide eyes and astonishment all over him.

"I did." She confirmed smiling, that smile again and he tried to think if there had been other times when she had smiled in that special way. "I really did."

*Oh.*

"Oh."

"And you know what?" El asked, a mischievous look appearing as she moved even closer.

"What?" he whispered, suddenly aware of what she wanted to do.

"I wouldn't mind doing it again." And with that, El pulled him towards her, kissing him one more time.

## 12. Chapter 11

### Chapter 11

"My god, Michael, do I have to teach you everything?"

Why that voice sounded so damn familiar?

"You seriously have to improve your skills on learning how to sneak people in; there is no way you can be this dumb."

What the heck was it all about? He was just sleeping, why couldn't people leave him alone in his dreams?

"You both have to wake up, dumbasses!" and with that Mike felt a hard slap... on his head.

"Ouch!" *what the...?!* His first instinct was to touch the place where he got hit, but for some reason his left arm didn't want to work, it was like it had gotten trapped under something.

Slowly and painfully, he managed to open his eyes, only to find his sister's face right in front of him.

"The sleeping beauty has finally woken up from his slumber!" she said, a weird smirk on her lips.

"What are you doing here? Leave me alone!" why was she waking him up? And why was he so damn hot?!

"You should actually thank the fact that I am the one who found this and not mom."

*What? God, there were too many information all at once.*

Someone, a third voice, joined the conversation with an annoyed groan; and that's when Mike finally remembered that he was laying on the couch, spooning El. *Oh shit.*

"Oh shit."

"Yeah, shit." Nancy echoed, still smirking. "She is El, right? It's amazing how I am always right!"

*Goddamn.*

"Nance, seriously? It's like six in the morning, just shut up."

"Actually, little brother, it's past eleven and mom was looking for you since she saw the car outside."

*Crap.*

El moved a little, stretching and making a little noise that made Mike smile at how cute she was.

"Mike... stop, sleep." She said softly not fully awake yet.

"Uhm... my sister's here." He murmured close to her ear and in less than a second she got stiff and got up, making him fall from the couch.

"Shit." Mike exclaimed landing on his butt.

"Oh my god, Mike sorry!" El apologized immediately trying to reach for him while Nancy, as the good sister she was, was laughing loudly at the scene.

The poor boy stood up, massaging his back and sitting down on the couch where El looked mortified and embarrassed to death.

"Don't worry," he tried to smile to her. "It's not your fault." And with that he turned to stare his sister who was still laughing.

"What?" Nancy asked looking the most satisfied person on earth. "You guys are so funny!"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Anyways, Nancy this is El, El, this is my annoying sister Nancy."

"Is that my pajamas?" the oldest girl inquired pointing and ignoring what her brother had just said.

El blushed furiously, turning to face Mike and looking almost panicked. "Yeah, uhm, she was cold so I gave her that." He answered trying not to give too many information.

"And why was she cold?"

Mike sighed. *Good lord.* "Could you give us some privacy? Please?"

"You have two minutes, mister, get dressed while I am going to tell mom that you are a real idiot."

They both followed Nancy as she went upstairs and sighed in relief when they were finally left alone.

"I'm so sorry El, I..."

"It's ok, Mike, you didn't know." She cut him immediately, a small blush still on her cheeks.

There was some kind of tension around them, awkwardness? He really didn't know, El was avoiding any kind of eye contact finding super interesting the messy basement where they were, Mike really didn't know what to do or what to say, it wasn't like he had experience.

She had kissed him too, last night, the second time and then he had kissed her again and well, they had kissed. Like a lot. And it had been nice, more than nice. It had been everything to him. He had seen her falling asleep while she was in his arms, the way her breath had become slower and softer until she was completely pressed against him, looking finally peaceful and... happy.

It had been the best damn night of his life.

But maybe it hadn't been for her? She had told him that she wanted to, so why was it so... weird? Did she regret it? Maybe... maybe she had just needed some kind of comfort?

*Stop it, Wheeler. Just shut the hell up. And maybe grow some balls?*

He cleared his throat, trying to get her attention. "Uhm... El?" "Yeah?" she turned to face him, but still not meeting his gaze.

"You ok?"

"Yeah." El answered and Mike was almost ready to die right there.

"Do you..." *come on, man, stop being such a pussy.* "Are you... ok with, you know...?" *Know what? Just... give up and try again maybe in 50 years.*

She looked at him almost expectant, like she wasn't getting what he was saying.

"About last night...?" Mike finally whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Do you... like, maybe you... didn't want to?"

"What?" El immediately jumped and finally looked at him in the eyes. "No, Mike, no, I told you I wanted! I just..." she grew quiet and Mike waited for her to talk. "Did you want to?"

"You kidding, right? I definitely wanted to!"

"Cool." A small smile appeared on her lips and the air around them changed as both realized that they had let their insecurities overcome what they both already knew.

"Cool." Agreed Mike, smiling too.

And without looking away, they both started to lean down, their lips almost touching...

"Ok, lovebirds! Time's up!" Nancy exclaimed scaring both to death. "You still in pjs?! Come on!" she complained once again in front of them.

"Nance, what do you want?" Mike asked feeling a little bit frustrated.

"An explanation would be a good start." She answered sitting down between Mike and El on the couch.

"Nothing to say, El needed a place to stay for the night and this was

the best option."

"Uh... So the best option was to cuddle with you on the couch and steal my pajamas because she was 'cold'?"

"Nancy..." Mike started annoyed.

"It's my fault, I was at a party and I got drunk and called him and he helped me." El said interrupting his lie.

Nancy nodded in silence, not saying anything back until she turned to face her brother. "So is she your girlfriend now?"

"Nancy!" Mike exclaimed blushing furiously. "Ok, this is it. You need to leave!"

"Nope, I am not done yet."

"Yes, you are, you are making El uncomfortable."

"So why did you get drunk?" the oldest girl kept going ignoring her brother.

"I was upset and seemed like the best idea."

"Nance, stop..." he tried again but in vain.

"And why did you call my brother?"

El flushed and stared her hands. "Because he is the only one I trust." She murmured nervously.

Mike's heart skipped a beat at her words and he just wanted to reach for her ignoring her sister and wrap his arms around her small figure.

Nancy, on the other hand, looked the girl for a few seconds, a hard and weird expression on her face that Mike had never seen before.

"Ok," His sister said getting up and startling them one more time. "I told mom that you were busy doing your nerd things and she left with Holly because we are out of milk, so you guys are safe. Nice to meet you, El." She waved at the girl and left again.

*What the...*

"I swear that was completely strange even for me!" Mike said as soon as his sister was out of the way, still not sure what had just happened.

El laughed a little. "It's ok, I kind of like her."

"Yeah, well I don't." he laughed back, glad she didn't want to run away after that really creepy meeting.

"There is one thing that it wasn't clear, though." She said sounding a little uncertain.

"What?"

"Am I your girlfriend?"

"Are you... am I... I, we... what?" Mike stuttered barely able to understand what she had asked him. *This is how you get the prize for being the best moron ever.*

El, instead of freaking out, laughed lightly, probably used to the boy making fun of himself every second of the day. "Breathe, Wheeler, I was joking."

"No, no, wait. I mean, do you want to?" *Oh god... did you just said that?*

"Well... I mean..."

There was a buzz that interrupted them, again. Then another buzz and another and another.

"Shit." El whispered jumping out of the couch and running to get her skirt on the chair.

"Is everything ok?" Mike got up too, although unsure of what to do.

"Yeah... it's... him."

"Oh... do you need to go back?"

"No, I'm... I'm just going to tell him that I spent the night somewhere and that we are hanging out."

"And he is not going to ask you anything?" *what the hell was wrong with that man?!*

"No if it is someone from the group, he usually doesn't care."

"Oh..."

They didn't speak while El typed her message to her... father, even if he really wasn't one.

Mike still needed time to process everything that she had told him the night before, a part of him wasn't even sure how that could be real; but the other part, wanted to take El far away from everything and hide her somewhere safe, where nobody could hurt her anymore.

"Ok, so he thinks I am at some dumb friend's house." She informed him sounding almost exhausted.

"Won't he check?"

"No, they will probably be too wasted to even remember who was really there, so I'm safe."

"I'm sorry." Mike whispered, taking a step forward at the same time she did, finally able to hug her, pulling her as close as he could.

"I'm ok, now I'm ok." The girl muffled pressing her face into his chest and tightening her arms around his waist.

"Are you sure?" he pressed a soft kiss on top of her head, smiling a little.

"Promise."

El parted just a little from him, on her face there was a look that he was slowly starting to understand what it meant, or better, what she wanted. He was never going to get used to this, wasn't he? The sparkle in her eyes, the little blush on her cheekbones, the way she licked her lips, parting them as they were both moving, her perfume

everywhere around him and...

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"Oh my god, seriously?!" El cried out exasperated, he couldn't blame her. "Please tell me this is not happening!"

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"Sorry...." He tried but yeah, she was right.

*Buzz buzz buzz*

*Buzz buzz buzz*

"It's not mine." El said, looking at her phone.

Mike reached for his coat and went through the pockets and found the phone. "It's mine." He spoke surprised. "And it's Will."

"Going to answer?"

He nodded and touched the screen to accept the call. "Will?"

"Oh! Hey! Hi!" he heard other voices and smiled without realizing it. "Are you ok? You left in hurry yesterday and we wanted to check on you."

"Tell him that he is an asshole!" someone shouted, and Mike recognized Dustin.

"Shut up, man! You don't know if it was serious!" Lucas yelled back.

"Can you both shut up? I can't hear anything!" Max, without any doubts.

"So yeah, you are on speaker, by the way." Will said.

"Oh, yeah, I'm ok, I uhm..." he looked at El who was staring at him

with an amused look, probably able to hear everything. "Someone needed my help." He explained shortly.

"Are you busy now? We were going to have a Harry Potter marathon."

"Well..." Mike didn't know what to say, he didn't want to disappoint them but at the same time he didn't want to leave El alone. "I'm sort of busy?"

"Oh come on!" Dustin yelled. "Stop being such a dickhead!"

"Why don't you let us know? We are going to have breakfast so we'll start in about 40 minutes. Send me a text ok?"

*Thank god for Will.*

"That sounds great, uhm, thank you!" he hung up before he could hear more yells from the others.

"You ok?" El asked.

"Yeah, they just wanted to invite me to a movie marathon."

"Oh... are you going?"

"What? No, you are here!" he responded quickly.

"So? I mean... we could both go?"

Mike opened his mouth, but didn't say anything, not really sure what to tell her. "Is it a good idea?"

"Well, we could tell them to, you know, keep the secret."

*Bad idea, Michael, bad idea.*

"Come on!" El tried. "You left yesterday for me, you own them some time!"

"I do, but you..."

"We are going to make it work."

"I don't think it's...." but El reached for his phone, stealing it from his hands and quickly typed something. "El what are you doing?"

"Too late, I texted him that we are going to be there."

*Oh god, this is bad.*

It wasn't like he didn't trust the group, even if he had met them only a few weeks ago he had felt an incredible bond with all of them, like if somehow they had known each other for years. He had never felt that comfortable with people like he was with them. But, to put El in the middle of all of that?

They knew her as 'Troy's friend', were they going to accept her? Were they going to tell their secret to everyone? And what if Troy and her dad would find out? Oh they were both going to be so screwed.

"Mike." El called him, snapping him out of his thoughts. "It's going to be ok."

"You don't know this, they could tell someone and you could..."

"Stop." She placed her hand on his mouth, looking in his eyes. "It's going to be ok, either way we are going to be fine."

"But..." Mike tried to talk.

"No buts, I'm tired of living in the constant fear that something is going to happen. I want to start to enjoy more and I want to do it with you, got it Wheeler?"

She made him those... puppy eyes that he just couldn't... So he nodded, surrendering and El smiled triumphantly and let her hand fall down.

*It's now or never, man.*

So, without letting her gloat too much and tired of the constant interruptions, he closed the distance between them, pressing his lips against hers, surprising the girl a little.

Last night their kisses had been cautious, innocent and slow;

exploring and giving time to the other to adjust to something that was completely new.

But this kiss, well, it was different, there was a certain security and also a certain need to feel the other closer than before. It was sweet but deeper.

El's hands were lost in his messy hair, pulling him towards her as she slowly opened her mouth to him. Their short breaths creating some kind of new music that was slowly becoming Mike's favorite sound; her hair tickling his forehead and while his left hand cupped gently her cheek, his right hand was on her back, pushing her against him. He was sure that he was going to fly away if he would stop holding onto her. His hand moved unconsciously to her waist, caressing her gently and she made a little noise of appreciation that made Mike's heart almost jump off his chest.

It was like there was nothing else in the whole world, like the world itself had been sucked away and there were only Mike and El left in the entire universe.

"Oh." El gasped, pulling away after a few moments, both their lungs praying for air. "Feel free to do that whenever you want." She chuckled panting but smiling.

"That was..."

"It was." She agreed rapidly.

It seemed like they had run for miles, both breathless and flushed. There was no way that it could be this good. How was that really happening?

"You ok?" El asked after a minute, touching gently his face.

"Yeah, I'm just... Trying to..." Understand? Believe? He really didn't know.

"Me too." But she understood. "However, your friends are waiting for us, so go change!"

El took a step back, parting from him, while he just groaned and

pouted like a little child. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously! Come on, stop complaining!" and with that she stood on her tip toes and pecked his lips one more time, giving him that smile that made his stomach flip. "Ok, I'm going! Wait here, though, I'm going to steal some clothes from Nancy for you."

"Do you think I can take a shower? I feel gross." She said sheepishly.

"Yeah, uhm, you have a shower in the bathroom here, I'm going to leave your clothes on the couch."

*Keep it cool, Mike.*

"Awesome!"

Mike run upstairs, quickly got into Nancy's room, thanking the fact that she was busy watching TV in the living room, and rushed back to the basement with a pile of fresh clothes, *really* trying to ignore the fact that there El was taking a shower in his bathroom.

He decided to take a shower too and fifteen minutes later, all dressed and ready, he went back downstairs, waiting on the stairs.

"Hey, uh, you ready?" his voice unsure.

El appeared after a second, her hair dampand dressed with her sister's pink sweatshirt and blue jeans. "Pink suits you." He told her before he could stop himself.

But when she blushed slightly, he knew he had said the right thing.  
"Thank you."

"So, my mother is not back yet... do you mind if we go with my bike?  
It's actually a nice day and not too chilly."

"Oh yeah! Are you sure is it ok for you?"

"Absolutely! I don't mind it at all!" *little bit too excited.*

They sneaked out from the door in the basement; Mike had left a note in the kitchen telling his family that he was going to spend some

time out, not that someone would actually care, but just in case.

"It's been a while since I've gone for a bike ride." El admitted taking place right behind Mike and putting her arms around Mike's waist holding onto him.

"I think it's one of the best feelings in the world." he declared happily while starting to pedal.

His bike wasn't the last model, but it had always worked fine for him, of course with El pressed against his back things were more difficult than usual as he wasn't really focusing and he was pretty sure he was going to crash at one point.

They didn't say a lot, there was no need to talk as they were both enjoying the ride. Mike could feel her little figure on him; her face on his back, her arms embracing him firmly and her hair dancing, there was no way he was going to be able to ride alone again, without thinking about that moment, how he felt by having her with him.

There were tons of things that they still needed to discuss, he wanted to ask more questions and understand more about her situation and how to help her, but he knew that she needed time and, just as she had talked to him the night before, she would tell him more when she would feel like it.

"Does your friend live far?" she asked surprising him and whispering softly in his ear making him shiver.

"Uh, not really, we should be there soon."

"Oh, ok." Was she disappointed? "I'm kind of enjoying this."

She was *definitely* going to be the death of him.

"Well, we could always go for more rides if you want to."

"I'd love to." El said and Mike knew that he was going to do even the impossible to be able to ride with her even one more time after that day.

As they got closer, he just couldn't stop thinking about all the things

that could go wrong, well it was his favorite hobby to imagine even the impossible, but there was no way he could risk El too.

When they arrived at Will's house, ten minutes later, Mike's first thought was that there was no way he was going to use the car again when he could simply cut through the woods and make it easier; his second thought was a pray to whatever god or divinity asking to make things... well, not too messy.

"Mike, it's going to be ok." El told him while getting off the bike. "I can hear you thinking from here."

"You don't know it, I mean what if..." She got closer, her face just a couple of inches from his, making him stop mumbling.

"Relax, it's going to be fine." *Oh god...*

She parted just in time as two seconds later they both heard someone shouting from the window. "You made it! Finally! We were..." Dustin stopped talking when he realized who was with him. "Holy shit! Holy shit!"

*This started well.*

"Shall we?" El grinned at a very pale Mike.

The door was already opened and the whole group was there, their faces almost not believing what they were seeing and keep looking first Mike and then El.

"It's her! I told you!" Dustin yelled pointing the girl.

Nobody said another word for what it felt years; the group in complete shock, Mike almost ready to faint and El... well she never thought her presence would cause such a reaction.

It was Lucas the first one to speak. "Uhm, Mike, care to explain what *she* is doing here?"

"Well, uh," but he really had no idea what to say as the whole linguistic side of his brain had decided to go for a momentarily vacation.

"Is she a spy?" Dustin asked with wide eyes.

"Seriously Dustin? A spy?" Max shook her head in disbelief.

"What?! I mean she works for the enemy!"

"The enemy? Come on!"

"Guys," Will interrupted them weakly. "Why don't we let them explain?"

"I still think she is a spy." Dustin murmured under his breath gaining another bad look from Max.

They all stared at them expectantly and only when Mike felt El's hand brush his own, he cleared his voice trying to find the words to finally talk.

"So, uhm, we met at school and... well, we started to hangout in secret, so Troy wouldn't find out and El is not a spy." *Worst introduction ever.*

"El? Who's El?" Dustin looked at him confused.

"I'm El," the girl said. "It's a nickname."

"So you brought her here because...?" Lucas intervened almost ignoring her.

"She, uh, was at my house when you guys called."

"Is she your girlfriend?!" Dustin yelled startling everyone.

"Well..." Mike started unsure of what to say.

"Actually I am." El answered surprising even him.

"You are?!" he turned to face her astonished.

"What? Do you think I am going around kissing guys randomly?" she whispered with a smirk.

"No, no! I..."

"Am I the only one not understanding what the hell it's going on?" Max cut them sounding a little annoyed.

"Nope, I'm in the same." Lucas agreed.

"Can we come in?" El tried smiling a little. "We are going to explain everything."

Will nodded and they all moved from the entrance to make them walk in; Mike was in some kind of trance and really wasn't sure of what was going on.

"Ok, so spill." Max said as soon as they were all in the living room, some sat on the couch some on the floor.

"So, a month ago or so, both Mike and I were in detention and well, I went to talk to him and we became friends. We didn't say anything to anybody because of Troy and..." El turned to look at Mike.

"I was afraid something would happen so we kept the secret." He finished after a second. "But El is not like them, she is not like him or the rest of those idiots." That was something he needed to make clear as soon as possible. "She, uhm, she doesn't want to be part of that group."

"So why is she still hanging out with them?" Lucas asked suspicious.

Mike saw El shifting a little. "It's kind of a complicated." Mike said immediately.

"So you thought that bringing her here would be better?" Max looked at the other girl like she was the most dangerous thing in the room.

"No, that was my fault; I was at his house and since he had to leave you guys yesterday I thought that he needed to spend some time with you." El murmured avoiding their gazes.

"Right!" Dustin shouted. "You got a call from 'El' last night!"

Nobody said a word for a couple of minutes and Mike knew that he needed to say something if he wanted to work out things.

"Listen, I know what you are thinking, but I promise you that you can trust El, we can't tell you everything, yet, but it would be great if you guys would trust us. She doesn't want to cause troubles and she is also pretty amazing, it would be great if you could give her a chance."

He felt her hand on his as she gently squeezed it in what was definitely a 'thank you'.

Will, who had barely said a word, stood up from the chair and walked in front of El. "I'm Will." He said offering her his hand.

El smiled brightly and shook it enthusiastically. "Nice to meet you."

"We had a class together last year, right?"

"Yeah, we had History."

"Oh you are right!" he nodded smiling. "Well, we were just having breakfast and there are some Eggos left, do you guys want some?"

"Yes, I'm starving!" Mike exclaimed excited that at least one of them was trying.

"I love Eggos." El smiled politely.

"Awesome! Then come and have some!"

They were about to stand up and follow Will when they heard Lucas clear his throat to get their attention.

"What?" Will asked nonchalantly.

"So, are we good we this? We don't even know her!"

"Lucas, you are being paranoid. I trust Mike and if he says that El is cool then she is cool."

"Plus she is his girlfriend!" Dustin laughed loudly.

"Well, at least he had the balls to do something about it!" Lucas replied to the guy.

"Shut up, Lucas!"

"No, you shut up!"

"Oh you both shut up!" Max screamed. "My god, you guys are a pain in the ass! Anyways, I agree with Will, and I actually need the support of another girl."

"I'm with Will and Max." Dustin said smiling. "And now I also know why you didn't want me to ask her out!"

"What?" El whispered looking at Mike with a smirk on her lips.

"Oh, uh, nothing."

"Oh, that's not nothing! Let's go have breakfast and I'm going tell you everything!"

While Dustin, Will, El and Max walked away from the living room, Mike stood to observe Lucas who was still sat and looking like had no intentions to move.

"Hey, I'm sorry if this is making you uncomfortable, I really didn't want to cause troubles." Mike apologized, hoping it would help.

"It's not that Mike, she might be a good girl, but I can't wonder what is going to happen if they find out."

"I know, I do that too and if they find out, we'll do our best to keep you all out of it, I promise."

Lucas stared at him one more second before nodding. "That sounds good to me." And Mike started to finally breathe again.

"So, Wheeler, tell me exactly how she became your girlfriend." The other guy grinned at him as he stood up.

"Uh..." *If I only knew, man...*

**A/N: Hi guys! I apologize for the late update but I have been sick basically all week (and I am still sick) but I'm starting to feel better so... here's the new chapter!**

**I'd like to thank all of you for your support! It really means a lot!**

**Hope you guys have a nice weekend and until next time! :)**

## 13. Chapter 12

### Chapter 12

He had no idea how those thoughts had come into his mind again, well, it was a lie, he knew how those little ants had gotten into him again, but admit the reality was way more painful than a simple and white lie.

Mike had fooled himself for the past couple of day, thinking that he had finally found his little oasis of peace, where nobody was going to hurt him and nothing was going to get him; it had been an hallucination, it had been the dream of a man starving in the desert, imagining things that weren't real, having sweet dreams in the middle of a storm.

His head was pounding. Hard. Fast. Like a hammer on a wall; like fist pounding on a door; like the screams that were stuck in his memories.

*It's your fault.*

*You deserve it.*

*You are just nothing.*

He had really thought that life, for once, had decided to give him a break, but eventually, life itself had now decided to take a break from that break, leaving him there, barely hanging and hoping to just... run away as far as possible.

That morning, he had woken up feeling almost happy, light as a feather and just thinking about the fact that for once, he wasn't stuck in the same tunnel where he had spent his last few years. But that certainty had been torn away the moment he had stepped in the living room. The first thing he had noticed was the huge Christmas tree stuck in the corner next to the fire place; the second thing was his sister Holly almost inside a box looking for decorations and the third thing was his father holding a bunch of Christmas lights all tangled and dusty.

It took him a full minute to realize that in less than twenty-four hours it was going to be Christmas and that he had completely forgotten about it.

"What are you looking at?" his dad had asked staring at him.

Of course Mike had not answered, he never did.

There was no way that he hadn't been able to remember about Christmas, how was that possible?

He didn't have presents for anyone; he didn't have cards where to write 'merry Christmas'; he didn't have anything, just his stupid brain and his awful memory.

It must have been that: his way to just stay in that spot without moving or saying anything that had triggered his father, who, as the good person he was, had started to get closer and closer, looking at him with that face, full of disgust and disbelief. Disbelief because he couldn't explain how he had gotten a son like him, such a weak loser, such a pathetic representation of a human being.

He had started to ask more questions, more info, more and more and more... until those questions had turned into yells, yells that should have caused a reaction but that had turned Mike into a dummy.

Mike's brain had become static, ignoring what the man in front of him was telling him, but even if he was trying hard not to listen, he had heard and had felt every single word.

He had lost track of time, track of life, he had been there, paralyzed and just standing, taking his mind as far away as he could but never far enough. Fists clenched so hard that he had been able to feel his nails digging deeper and deeper and deeper.

A part of his brain had been able to feel the presence of his mom, who was trying to take his father away and that's when he had just left, running to the door and getting on his bike pedaling so fast, so hard that even his knees at one point had started to pray for him to stop.

He was lost, lost and gone. Lost and broken, not there, not breathing,

not feeling.

Hours must have passed, the air was cold and he was only wearing the light t-shirt and pair of jeans he had put on when he had woken up. He was freezing, but couldn't move, he had no idea where he was, somewhere in the woods, he had just collapsed after his legs had refused to move further.

It hurt.

It hurt so much.

Mike didn't know what was exactly, but it hurt.

His mind was trapped in this awful fog, everything was covered, everything was... grey, he couldn't look or understand because everything had been infected.

His head was trapped between his legs, his arms hugging them and even if he was a giant, in that moment he was the smallest thing on the planet.

He had been so stupid.

He had believed that he could deserve good things too.

His thoughts were too messy to listen to them, they were so confused. He couldn't focus on anything. His brain had just turned off.

*It's ok.*

*No it's not, but it's ok.*

*It's ok.*

It was like he needed something but he couldn't understand what. It was like he needed everything but nothing at the same time.

*You are so stupid.*

It was like he wanted to be found but he also wanted space.

*So damn stupid.*

He could remember that article he had read that one time, something in his mom's magazines about finding 'happy thoughts', but he was so tired, how was he going to find them?

Did he have them? What were his 'happy thoughts'?

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

He didn't want to find them, not yet at least, he needed the pain, he needed to feel it, to prove himself that he was able to feel at least something.

What was wrong with him? Why was he such a coward? Why couldn't he be stronger?

He was sure that at one point he must have dozed off, his brain too tired to keep going, deciding to give him a break. And few minutes later he had opened his eyes, confusion was there but somehow he had started to feel his strengths coming back to him; his legs had fallen asleep and carefully he tried to untangle himself, grimacing in pain when he stretched his limbs.

Mike took a look around, his back was pressed against a tree, its roots were surrounding him, there were leaves and branches and for some reason it felt safer than any other place in the whole world.

He sighed, the first very action he did after who knows how long. He was still dizzy, still walking in that same fog, but he could feel it slowly going away, leaving him space to look at better things.

There was this little voice in his head telling him to stand up and stop being such a little girl, but the other voices were just stronger and way louder. He knew he had gotten Nancy worried sick; he knew that he had to come back at one point, except, he was not going to move from there.

His hands were so cold, he could barely feel them anymore, although his body wasn't responding, he tried to tuck them into the pockets of his pants but stopped when the tip of his fingers brushed against something even colder.

Confused, Mike grabbed the object and gasped in surprise when it turned out to be his phone. He couldn't remember putting it in the first place; it probably had been inside the pocket from the day before. Almost as he was on the automatic pilot, he unlocked the screen and frowned when he noticed that there were twenty missed calls, twenty five messages and six voicemails.

*What the...*

Mike just starred at the screen, not sure of what to do. It was almost unreal; like that phone had been in that pocket on purpose, although he had no memories of placing it there. Sort of a fortunate accident, someone would say. A weird grin appeared on his face, he had always wished to be with someone or to be able to even make a call when he was feeling like that, but he had never been able to. Yet, now that he had the chance to ask for help, he knew it was never going to happen.

Mike didn't need to look who those calls where from, there was no doubt and only two people on that damn planet knew what he would become in those situations.

He hated himself for being so selfish. He really did. But there was no way in hell he would simply drag Nancy or El down with him.

*El...*

God, he was an asshole. Regretting it in the same moment he did it, he pressed the icon of the messages: eighteen were from her.

His head, his whole body was screaming to him, yelling to press the button and just call her, and even if it sounded so easy, he couldn't.

She had trusted him with her secrets, she had trusted him to be her boyfriend, she had trusted him to be there for her when she couldn't take care of herself and what was he doing? Running away like he

always did.

*Pathetic.* He could feel his dad's voice echoing. *Pathetic.*

As he tried to send away the wicked voice, he got a new message, always from El. He dared to read it and he felt his heart breaking at her words.

Without double thinking it, he dialed the number. She answered right away.

"Mike..." a whisper, so soft, relieved and just perfect.

He didn't say a thing, no words, nothing there, completely empty. Maybe he was still sleeping, maybe he was dreaming it. He couldn't be this lucky, the phone in his pocket was just a dream, that call was just a dream, her voice was just a dream.

But her breathing was the best thing ever and there was no way he was just imagining it. Making him feel better, he tried to imitate it, and little by little even those awful voices started to slip away.

"Just tell me where you are."

Honestly, he had no idea.

"Send me your position, with the phone I mean, I'm going to find you, ok?" it sounded like she was making the most important promise ever. It made Mike smile.

She hung up first, and even though he had no idea how it worked, he started to touch things and he somehow found the map and forwarded it to El.

As the silence grew stronger the guilty followed it quietly, whispering in his ear that he shouldn't have made that call, he had no right to ask for her help.

At the same time, though, something else was telling him that he had done the right thing, it was fine to ask for help, it was ok to be weak. He didn't really believe it, but couldn't help wondering if maybe that was what he needed.

Mike didn't move from where he was, too afraid that maybe El wouldn't find him if he decided to move. He just hoped that things would find a way to go back to that normality that he had liked so much.

Soon, although he wasn't really sure of how long he had passed thinking of things that seemed almost gone, he heard footsteps cracking leaves and breaking branches. He sat up a little, something in the back of his mind telling him that he shouldn't look that miserable for whoever was going to find him there.

They got closer and closer, until he could feel the presence of someone standing right next to him; Mike didn't even look, he knew who that was just from the gasp that left her mouth.

His heart was beating so fast, anxiety taking over him and not leaving almost any chance to elaborate a straight thought. Words got stuck in the throat and his body froze as shame and guilt hit him all over again.

But El, well, she was something else and as she sat by his side, he felt his eyes burning as fresh tears were threatening to come out again.

She didn't speak, she didn't touch him, she just stood there and despite the fact that she wasn't using words, the message was pretty clear: she was there to be his rock and to support him and he couldn't be more grateful.

"Isn't it funny?" he said avoiding her gaze, his voice coming out croaked and broken.

She waited, not pressuring him, giving him time to adjust and being more perfect than ever.

"You are the one that somehow keeps coming and saving me." A sad laugh came out of his mouth. "I don't even know how I can do this to you, I don't even know how you can stay here, I..." Mike interrupted himself, he was being the victim, like usual and instead of fighting to get back on his feet, he was there moping and complaining to someone who definitely had more serious problems than him.

"I shouldn't have called; I don't even know how the phone ended up in my pocket, I'm sorry, El."

The girl, who sat next to him and had been quiet during his whole rambling, sighed deeply and shook her head.

"There are tons of things I would like to tell you right now, but I know you won't listen and I really don't feel like stupid pep talks, so the only thing I am going to tell you is that... if you are there for me, it's logical to suppose that I'll be there for you." Her voice was calm but firm and deep down, Mike knew that she was right, accepting it, though, that was another story. "Do you want to talk about it?" this time she sounded sweeter and that only made Mike feel like crap.

"I just forgot about Christmas." He murmured, words coming out without even realizing it.

What he had just said, didn't really make sense, however, El had somehow understood because carefully she covered his hand with hers, making him feel like he could finally breath again.

Mike stared at their hands, a gesture so simple and so innocent but at the same time so powerful and meaningful. He smiled a little when he noticed how small her hand was compared to his.

They both waited, not sure for what, but they stayed there.

Until the moment when she stood up, abruptly, startling him a little.  
"Ok, now we have to go, so... move."

"Where?" He had no intentions of going back.

"You told me you forgot about Christmas, so you probably need to go Christmas shopping. I'm taking you to the mall."

"But I don't have money." He muffled confused by the unexpected plan.

"I'll call Nancy and tell her to bring your wallet. Now, stand up or I'm going to drag you to the mall kicking you in the ass if necessary."

"I..."

"Mike, I'm not going to let you stay here, so you better move or I swear you are going to regret the moment you decided not to listen to me."

Too tired to fight back, he pushed himself up, trying to stretch himself a little.

"Good choice." El said smiling, although her smile didn't really reach her eyes, thing that made him frown and forget about his mess.

"You ok?" he asked a hint of worry in his voice.

She looked surprise by his question, but recovered quickly. "I'm fine, I just..." she didn't finish the sentence, reaching for him and wrapping her arms around his body, holding him so tightly that for a second he lost breath.

Having her in his arms was like holding the key to every single of his problems, it was like she was fresh air and he had been choking by breathing intoxicating smoke all his life. There was no way he could deserve someone like her.

And it was in that moment, while holding El, in the middle of the woods, as the cold wind was slowly blowing faster and thinking that it was more a dream than reality, that Mike knew that it didn't matter how messed his life was, or how messed up he was, as long as he had El, everything would find a way to work out.

The girl parted from him, her hand caressing his cheek softly, almost like a ghost, a look in her eyes that was telling him more things than any word could ever say, so, without thinking and momentarily putting his crap in a box as far as possible, he leaned in and kissed her, surprising her and himself too.

El didn't escape, though; he felt her relaxing in his arms and sighing happily. Her hands went up from his waist to cup his neck; his hands flew to her cheeks, wanting to keep her as close as possible.

Was it stupid to compare her lips to clouds? It probably was but, they were just so soft and when she parted them, giving him more access so their tongues got finally reunited again, he couldn't help but

feeling like there was never going to be someone like her. She was one and only.

They parted few moments later, their lungs screaming for air. Mike slowly opened his eyes and just stared at the girl in front of him: her lips swollen and red, his hands were still on her cheeks and he could feel them being heated up even if it was freezing out there. Her eyes were still closed, like she was not ready to give up on that moment, yet. She pressed her lips together then, and smiled that smile that would light up the entire world. It definitely lighted up Mike's.

"Are you ok?" Mike asked gently, not wanting to pressure her.

"Definitely." She giggled.

Mike frowned, since when El giggled? He had never heard her giggle before.

She seemed to realize what she had done and blushed furiously, dropping her hands and looking away, embarrassment written all over her face.

But Mike had found it cute, very cute, actually. "Don't," he whispered trying to meet her eyes. "It was cute."

She shook her head, disagreeing but no saying another word. "We better go, Nancy is probably out of her mind at this point."

"What? Why?" He couldn't help the confusion in his voice.

"She is the one that called me and told me what was going on."

"Oh..." he suddenly felt ashamed, and it was his turn to look away, lowering his hands and feeling like stepping away even from her.

"It's ok, Mike, really, I..."

"Can we just not?" Mike interrupted her, his tone harsher than he had meant. "Just forget it, ok? Just... stop."

"Mike..."

"No, El, please, not you too, I can't." Saying that he sounded almost

desperate was an understatement.

El sighed and nodded, sign that she was giving up. "I just need you to know that I'm here for you, I don't care what you think, you are... I'm going to be there whether you like it or not."

He didn't protest, it was going to be pointless anyways.

"Ok, let's go, now." And with that she tentatively for his hand, and feeling like he had been way too hard on her, he accepted it, squeezing it gently.

As they were walking back Mike noticed two things: first of all he had no idea where he was and second of all he had no idea how El had been able to find him.

"How did you get here?" he spoke breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

"The position you sent me was close to Maple Street and when I parked I saw your bike on the side of the road, I just walked and hoped to find you."

"Why Nancy didn't come to find me?" Mike asked surprising El with that question.

"Well, she wanted to follow you but she thought that maybe you didn't want to talk to someone who is...not related to you? I guess she thinks that you would have listened to me better."

And Nancy had been right, as usual, El was always going to get him out.

"So, Will texted me this morning," She said hoping to move to a less heavy subject. "He said that they are organizing a party for New Year's Eve and they invited us to go."

Since the day Mike and El had gone to Will's house, three days ago, the boys and Max had accepted El into their group and they had been able to hangout all together. Trying to keep their friendship a secret from the rest of the town, they had decided that Will's house was the designated hangout place, far away from the center and too lost in

the woods for people to ever find out. It had been nice to spend time and just enjoying, laughing at their jokes, watching movies with them and commenting about things, it had been nice to forget about his dark side and finally see the light. Having El always by side and seeing her being free, not worrying about what was going to happen next had been the best thing in the world; El and Max had bonded almost immediately, although very different, they had found a common ground that would give them a break when the boys would just become too wild.

That's how he had forgotten about Christmas, even if Will's house had been fully decorated; he had been way too wrapped into that happiness to think about anything else.

"So, what do you think?" her voice dragged him out of his cloud, her expression a little worried.

"Sorry, uhm, what?"

"Do you want to go? I can skip Troy's party and since my father is out of town, nobody is going to care."

"I, uh, I don't know."

"It's just going to be us and food and a bottle of sparkling cider, nothing fancy." El tried and he could hear the hope in her voice, just he wasn't sure.

"You can go if you want to, I don't think it's a great idea for me to be there."

And that made El stop walking, turning to face him. "I wouldn't go without you. If you want to be home and just chill I'll stay with you."

Mike smiled, she was so stubborn and he knew there was no way to make her change her mind. "Can I think about it?" it wasn't a yes, and the fact that in that moment the only thing he had, was negativity, didn't help the decision.

But El smiled and his heart sped up. "Of course you can, we have plenty of time."

Few minutes later they finally arrived to the car, Mike put his bike in the trunk and after fastening with a rope that El had smartly brought with her, they headed to the mall.

"I can't stick around for long," she murmured sadly. "My father, he... has some business dinner tonight and I have to go with him, but Nancy is going to meet us there so you won't be alone."

"Are you going to be ok? Wait, you are not in trouble because you came to find me, are you?" suddenly worried, Mike met her gaze, he didn't want to be the cause of other problems, yes, he needed her (although he won't ever admit it) but if he was source of troubles for her, well he was going to do even the impossible and find a way to help himself alone.

El laughed lightly and squeezed his hand to reassure him. "No, don't worry, he wasn't home so he has no idea where I am, and even if he did, I would have found a way to lie to him."

The boy sighed in relief, glad that she wasn't going to end up with a hard time.

"You know," El started focusing on driving but blushing a little. "When Nancy called me, she said that you probably needed a friend to talk to."

He looked at her confused. "Yeah?"

"And that, that friend was me." She continued.

"Ok?" He really had no idea where she was going with that.

"She said 'friend'." El repeated, turning quickly to look at him.

"I still don't get it." Mike admitted and noticed that El was really trying not to laugh at him.

"Mike, why does your sister think that I am your friend?"

"Wait," Mike said frowning. "We are not friends?"

*Am I this dumb?*

"Yeah, we are friends, Mike, but..." she cleared her throat sounding a little shy. "I thought...I thought... I was your girlfriend."

*Oh.*

"Oh!" he exclaimed finally connecting the dots. "Yes! Yes you are, I mean, you are, right?"

*Please tell me I didn't mess this up!*

El forced a laugh. "I thought we already talked about this."

"Yeah, no, I know," *idiot*. "I'm sorry, I... I don't know what I'm doing and..." he took a deep breath and waited for El to park right in front of the mall before keep going.

"Look," Mike started when the car finally stopped and he could look at her in the eyes. "I have no idea what is going on with me. I don't understand anything when it comes to... relationships or just human interactions, and I know I suck, like I really do. I... You, being my girlfriend is like... one of those dreams that you have right before you wake up, when there's light and you are happy and... well, you just want to keep dreaming, you know?" He shook his head and took a deep breath before going on. "You make it so easy, like you are just so happy and I... I'm still trying to believe that you are actually real and I'm not becoming delusional. I'm sorry I didn't tell Nancy, it just... it is something so great that I wanted to keep it to myself for a little while."

Mike could see the shadow of tears in El's eyes, but he needed to tell her everything, she needed to know. "I wish I could... be different, but, honestly? I'm way too broken for that."

"I don't want you to be different." El whispered smiling a little and wiping away a tear. "I won't change a single thing about you."

Mike laughed softly. "I just... I still don't understand how is possible that you are real."

"Well, Wheeler, you just need to accept it, because I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

El nodded her expression serious. "Promise."

She made the first move, getting closer to him, parting her lips a little, closing her eyes and...

"Seriously?! Guys, it's a parking lot!"

Mike groaned frustrated. "Nancy..." he turned to find her standing close to the passenger window.

"So much for the secret." El joked parting from him and Mike felt the disappointment running through his body.

"Come on, get out we don't have much time!" his sister announced knocking on the glass.

"I have to go." El said pouting a little.

"It's ok, don't worry, let me know if you need help or anything ok?"

"Sure, uh, can I see you tomorrow?"

Christmas day with his family had already been ruined, and besides his sisters, he really didn't care about the dinner with his relatives and faking that everything was fine. "Absolutely! Text me when you are free."

"Mike!" his sister yelled.

"Coming!" he yelled back. "See you tomorrow?" he turned to face El, who was smiling at the scene.

"See you tomorrow." She reassured squeezing his hand.

With one last look, he opened the door and got out, waving gently at her.

"Geez, Mike, you are going to see her in like, 24 hours!" Nancy commented pulling him away by his arm. "You guys are disgusting." Nancy groaned when he didn't move, watching El's car leaving.

He turned to face her, ready to reply with something not really nice,

but before he could even open his mouth, his sister had wrapped him in a tight hug. "I'm glad you are ok." She whispered holding him.

Mike didn't say anything, there was no need, they both knew already how much they meant to each other.

"So, uh, Christmas shopping!" Nancy said parting. "Any idea what you want to get for your girl?"

*Shit.*

"From the look on your face I guess the answer is no." she teased smirking. "Want some help?"

"No, not really, I... I need to work on it alone." He really did and it needed to be something decent. "Can you worry about Holly and Mom? And find maybe a pair of socks for dad?"

"Sure thing I can, let's go Romeo!"

"Seriously?"

"Ok, ok, my bad, just... go."

The moment Mike walked into the mall, he almost regretted not accepting Nancy's help, but he just couldn't give El something that his sister had picked, right? Not that he knew how that really worked, because of course this was his the first time ever buying something for a girl that wasn't his mother or sisters, but he was going to find something... or at least he hoped so.

The mall wasn't a big place, there were just a bunch of shops and well, what could you expect from a place like Hawkins?

As he walked around he felt a little better knowing that there were still tons of people buying things last minute just like him. Mike walked past clothes' shops and electronics one and ignoring shops that were selling candles or perfumes. There wasn't much of a choice and after 30 minutes of walking around he was ready to give up. The only two things left on the list were two little stands right in the middle of the mall, one was selling cases and batteries for cell phones, but the other had what it looked like antiques and some

jewelry on it and, as hopeless as he was, he got closer to take a look.

"Can I help you?" a little man, with no hair and looking like he was at least 60 years old, behind the stand immediately asked.

"Uh, sure, I really don't know what I am looking for, though."

"What do you have in mind?" his raspy voice was sort of funny and Mike, decided that yes, he needed help.

"A present for... uh, my girlfriend."

The man moved so he was right in front of Mike, a sweet smile on his face. "First Christmas?"

"Yes," *was it so obvious?* "It's the first."

"Well, I can show you some bracelets or maybe earrings?"

He had never seen El wearing bracelets and earrings weren't enough. Mike looked around, there were tons of rings and bracelets and necklaces and... he stopped suddenly when he saw a pendant.

The boy got closer and wrapped his fingers around it: it was a round, golden locket, bigger than a quarter but still small enough and with a weird symbol on it. It looked like a snake but there was no head, it was a little spiral attached to a zigzagged line.

"What's this?" he asked staring at the necklace.

"Oh, that symbol? It's called 'unalome', it's a symbol that represent someone's path in life. Which, of course, it's not always an easy path."

Gently and carefully Mike opened the locket and touched the space inside it.

"You like it?" the man asked startling him.

"Yeah, I do." And it was true, there was something about that necklace that made him feel like it was the best thing in the world. Yes, El wasn't really a jewelry type, but he couldn't help but picture it on her.

"You can put anything in, pictures or even a message." Mike nodded, although he really wasn't listening.

Not waiting even one more minute, he bought the pendant and run to find Nancy.

"Oh there you are!" She exclaimed when he found her right by the exit. She was carrying three different bags and looked like ready to kill someone. "People are so rude! I hate them!"

"Look what I have found!" he almost yelled with joy, showing her the necklace.

"Oh Mike," Nancy said looking at it. "It's so beautiful!"

"I know!"

"What are you going to put inside?"

"I, uh, have an idea, but... can't tell you."

Nancy snorted but smiled. "I'm proud of you, little bro."

They got home just a few minutes later, but after Nancy parked she turned to look at Mike. "You ok? You don't have to come in if you are not ok, I can wait with you."

But Mike shook his head. "No, I'm..." he wasn't feeling bad, El, the shopping and everything have been a great distraction and in that moment he felt like he could do it.

"Mom wasn't happy either, she was worried when you left." His sister told him.

"I'm ok, Nance, I'm just going to go upstairs and... I'm ok." He got out of the car first, too tired to be afraid. The house was quiet and nobody was around, followed by his sister they both went upstairs.

Once in his room Mike felt safe, but he had a job to do, so without losing more time, he grabbed his notepad and a pen and started writing.

Only a few hours later, when the sky had gone dark and all the lights were out, he smiled proudly at his work. The locket not empty anymore and filled with something that had been on Mike's mind since the day El had talked to her.

He started at the two sides and read again for the thousandth time those words now framed there:

*You came into my life like a flower on the breeze*

*When I'm with you my hearts on stormy sees*

*For so long I've felt trapped in hell*

*Until I met you, my El.*

A/N:

Guys I am so sorry about this HUGE delay! I feel really bad and again I apologize! It has been a crazy couple of weeks and really didn't have much time to update!

I want to thank you my dear friend M. who is ALWAYS the best supporter and, dude, I love you, thank you for listening to me and for this amazing poem!

Let me know what you guys think, and until next chapter!